



# Embracing Cultures

# Don't Let Differences in Background Stand Between Your Spa and Valuable New Hires and Clients

BY HEATHER E. SCHWARTZ

Robin Lynn Cook, president of Le Boe European Day Spa in Coral Springs, Fla., looked at the demographics of her client base one day and noticed something. All of the spa's clients were between 30 and 60 years old and earned an average income of \$200,000. They were also all Caucasian.

Cook knew she needed to make some changes, not only to expand her business, but specifically to serve people with varied cultural backgrounds. After all, the spa already employed a culturally diverse staff, including people from Russia, Poland, Germany and Thailand and several Hispanic countries. It made sense to have an international outlook when seeking and serving clients, too.

Many spa owners want to build a business that employs a culturally diverse staff and caters to a multicultural client base. The question is: How?



Le Boe European Day Spa reached out to multicultural clients with its Around the World event. Guests sampled foods from many cultures and enjoyed discounted spa treatments.

### Wanted: Diversity in the Spa

Assessing your client base and employee group is a good way to start creating a spa that welcomes people of varied cultures, according to Jody Alyn, president of Jody Alyn Consulting based in Colorado Springs, Colo. The company specializes in helping businesses operate more efficiently with a focus on inclusion and turning the challenges of cultural differences into opportunities. Compare that to the demographics in your community, and you can figure out who's missing from your business. For example, if there's a large Asian population in your city and you don't have any Asian clients or employees at your spa, you know you need to start reaching out.

One way to do that is by joining a multicultural club in your city. That's how Cook started spreading the word about her spa and her new mission. "Most cities have these groups. Or check with your chamber of commerce," she suggested.

Cook next organized an "Around the World at Le Boe European Day Spa" event, inviting members of the club and the community to visit the spa, sample foods from different cultures and enjoy discounts on spa services. That night, four members of the multicultural club signed up for her focus group, intended to help her determine what clients with varied ethnic backgrounds want from a spa experience.

Many avenues are available for telling an international audience about your spa. These include making connections with

**"Cultural and religious issues come up in a spa the same as they do in regular life."**

local immigration services, talking with spa school administrators and joining multiple chambers of commerce. If you want to attract people from a specific culture, look for organizations that cater especially to them. As an example, Alyn said, "In our area, a lot of business owners want to connect with the Hispanic population. We have a Hispanic chamber of commerce."

It's also a good idea to look at the tools you're already using to communicate with clients, said Alyn. Décor in your spa should make everyone feel welcome. That means reflecting multiple cultures in artwork and waiting area reading materials, which you may want to provide in multiple languages. Alyn recommended that spa owners post signs to alert clients if bilingual employees are available and can offer translation services. Make sure your Web site and e-mail newsletters include images that represent many different cultures. And if you're posting flyers, emphasize products and services that will especially appeal to the ethnic groups you're trying to reach.

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### Expanding Knowledge

Spa owners can find out more about the needs of people with specific cultural backgrounds by reading and researching. After all, it's important to know if your Middle Eastern clients will demand that their therapist's gender match their own. "Cultural and religious issues come up in a spa the same as they do in regular life," noted Susan Harmsworth, chief executive with ESPA International (UK) Ltd., in Farnham, Surrey, England, which develops spas in the five-star market all over the world.

One benefit to employing a staff that includes people of different cultures is that you can ask a firsthand source for information and ideas. It's a reliable method for finding out more about the cultures within an ethnic group. As Alyn pointed out, there are many differences within cultures to be aware of, too. The Asian community, for instance, includes Korean, Thai, Vietnamese and Chinese people, to name just a few. There are also differences between new immigrants and those who immigrated to the United States years ago, so someone with firsthand knowledge could prove invaluable.

According to Erica Pinsky, principal consultant with her firm, Erica J. Pinsky Inc., based in Vancouver, British Columbia,

Canada, and author of "Road to Respect: Path to Profit," spa owners should start by examining and being aware of their own prejudices and assumptions. "We may subconsciously have assumptions we make based on ethnicity," she explained. "Don't let those catch you off guard."

She recalled meeting with a client who learned, at the end of the meeting, that Pinsky is Jewish. The client remarked that he "never would have known." While Pinsky doesn't believe he meant any offense, she wasn't sure how to take the comment. Clearly the client had certain ideas about what made a person "obviously" Jewish.

Alyn advised making an effort to find out which terms are acceptable and which are not. For example, "Oriental" refers to furniture and rugs, not people. "International" is a more respectful term than "foreign." "It's not so much about being politically correct," she said. "It's about being professionally competent and personally courteous."

Spa owners can take the proper language into relationship-building discussions about workplace issues. Pinsky advised talking to staff members about the holidays they celebrate and

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Jack Tran, a therapist at Le Boe European Day Spa, works with a guest during the Around the World event.

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working to accommodate days off. She also suggested buying a multi-faith calendar and marking the celebrations that matter to everyone. Parties at work should be given special consideration, too. When planning, remember that many people don't drink alcohol, eat pork or go out on Friday nights for religious or cultural reasons. Spa owners shouldn't be afraid to ask staff members what they need and work with them to help make it happen.

"Fear often prevents us from engaging in that dialogue. People are really afraid of offending," Pinsky noted. "When you think and talk about issues, there aren't hard-and-fast rules to follow. Just come from a place of respect."

### Language (and other) Barriers

Respect is always necessary when handling the tricky and personal issues that can crop up at work. Cook recalled explaining a particular treatment to a staff member who spoke English well, but didn't quite get the meaning of the spa's Bootylicious Bottom Facial. "She kept asking, 'Bottom of what?'" Cook said, noting that while all of her employees speak wonderful English, directions often need to be explicit if she wants to get her meaning across.

Both verbal and non-verbal communication can be challenging when managers, staff and clients come from different ethnic backgrounds. When it comes to serving clients, Alyn said spa owners should educate themselves about the kinds of touch that are acceptable within other cultures. And it's important not to assume everyone knows the routine at a spa. Use plain language – without jargon, slang or idioms – to tell clients exactly what they can expect from a visit and a treatment.

Staff and management relations can also benefit from thorough explanations. Without those discussions, spa managers



**Understanding and embracing cultural differences can enhance the spa experience for the therapist and client.**

may misinterpret some employee behavior. For example, Alyn said some cultures believe direct eye contact is disrespectful to authority. That could help an American spa manager understand why an employee won't look her in the eye. There are also many cultures that don't view time the way it is viewed in the United States. That could explain an employee's chronic lateness.

Cultural behavior isn't always easy to recognize. As Alyn explained it, culture is to us like water is to a fish: You don't even know you're in it until you're out of it. "Have a conversation if you don't understand someone's behavior," Alyn said. "Don't assume and label behavior negatively."

**Hang In There** Learning to serve multicultural clients is an ongoing process that won't happen overnight. While you're ramping up your knowledge and capabilities, Alyn recommended hanging a sign in your spa to advertise efforts and plans. Here's what you might want to say:

**All are welcome.**

**We appreciate your patience as we grow in our ability to serve you.**

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## Creating Your Culture

Making your spa multicultural means creating a culture all your own, said Alyn, with shared beliefs, norms, values and behavior. Harmsworth and Pinsky agreed and added that it's a good idea to talk with staff and decide: What are the standards at your spa for timeliness and hygiene? Is the language of your spa English? What happens if some employees speak another language? Will those who don't speak that language feel left out if it's used in public areas or during breaks?

Be prepared to support employees so they can work in the spa culture you create. Harmsworth noted that ESPA has found therapists from various cultures need different kinds of training to work in the five-star market. Russian therapists, for instance, have needed to learn to smile more often when engaging their clients. They also needed to learn the importance of accommodating privacy by draping towels. In China, therapists from the countryside had to learn more about hygiene, as many of them grew up without running water in their homes.

Training in these areas might seem unconventional by American standards. In the end, however, these types of challenges can be overcome through education and information. While all cultures live differently, Harmsworth has found a common denominator among therapists from around the globe: They love to learn and will work hard to succeed.

When spa owners want to diversify, it's up to them to teach and inform – with an international outlook – both staff and clients. With the right attitude, spa owners can convey the message that they're ready to serve and hire people with a variety of cultural identities. According to Alyn, success with multicultural clients and employees comes down to three keys: "Value and respect differences

enough to learn about the cultures of the people you're working with; be flexible enough to adapt your behavior to those other cultures; and have a multicultural frame of reference." ■

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