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Luxury spa experience: This time it is personal

December 18, 2015



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I am a mum of two young children and I am also client services director for an agency specializing in beauty, luxury and healthcare brands. So the time I spend in a day spa is at an absolute premium, carefully chosen based on trusted recommendations.

My expectations are high, but spas are everything that luxury should represent: immersion in a sensorial and physical environment that is a total escape for mind, body and soul.

However, my recent birthday visit to one of London's hottest five-star day spas was distinctly lukewarm. Yes, there was beautiful interior design and excellent products. But all the little things that add up to make this an exceptional day out were absolutely wrong.

When luxury brand experiences rely 100 percent on attention to detail to elevate things to the extraordinary, this spa was not worth the five-star price tag.

Suffice it to say I did not leave as a brand ambassador. Things went awry from the moment I arrived and was greeted with the wrong customer's booking details.

Then there was the couple next to me incessantly swiping smartphones in a no-mobile phone environment, the staff sounding like a training brochure recitation, and I was asked for payment as I was leaving even though the bill had already been settled.

It could have all been so different.

Pressing issues

Let us start with the personnel. Throughout my stay, hospitality staff and therapists seemed to lack the empowerment necessary to deliver a great, personalized luxury brand experience.

My companion explicitly mentioned it was my birthday upon arrival, but it was never once acknowledged. A glass of bubbly or a gift of nicely wrapped samples has a minimal cost outlay, but could have paid huge dividends in terms of my brand loyalty and advocacy.

Staff members that are allowed to flex treatments and service rather than follow a set script are the difference between a competent and excellent customer experience.

In the United Kingdom, mainstream retailer John Lewis gives staff at all levels of seniority the autonomy to meet customer needs on an impromptu basis. This should be a given in any luxury environment.

Next up is effective use of data and systems. Omnichannel experience sounds like incredibly contemporary marketing jargon, but it is really just a modern reinvention of the seamless, deeply personal service delivered in traditional gentleman's clubs or luxury hotels. It is about having your needs understood and anticipated, with an experience tailored to suit.

In the spa setting, this means delivering the ultimate in pampered wellbeing.

Beauty of it

A Web or application check-in questionnaire would have enabled reception staff to plan birthday specific service and to suggest the right products for my treatments, as well as get the boring health and safety bits out the way. Instead, I spent a significant proportion of my treatment time going through various product options.

The therapists did seem to use tablets to record the products they used, but the details were provided to me on a piece of paper. That is fine, but why not also provide me with the relevant samples? And what about a "this is what you used during your stay" follow-up email, with links for me to purchase products immediately?

A huge amount of customer intelligence could be leveraged into an all-encompassing brand experience for global spa and beauty product brands.

An integrated system that gathers data from spa point-of-sale, Web site, smartphone app and retail concession-based app could register customers' previous visits, preferences and purchasing patterns in all locations.

So whenever and wherever you arrive, the spa or retail counter already knows your skin type, allergies, most recent treatments and preferred products. And it definitely knows your birthday.

For global travelers, the spa brand based so often in hotel settings could become a modern alternative to a member's club, effectively turning it into a series of luxury leisure destinations where you are welcome and your needs are catered to.

DATA INTEGRATION is tricky and it takes time, but it is reflective of an attitude that puts customers at the very center of the brand's exclusive, luxurious spa offer.

There are thousands of beautifully designed spas and beauty products globally. Delivering an exquisite, personalized experience over and above a beautiful setting with some nice smells will be the only way to survive.

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