

RECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES



BASIC RULES FOR A LASTING MARRIAGE

As member demographics evolve with an aging population, many club owners are thinking about adding day spas to their athletic clubs and fitness centers. These are “arranged marriages”, if you will, of a membership fee-based club business with a pay-as-you-go, customer service-based spa business. The strategic thinking behind these unions is sound. Both businesses thrive on similar demographics and both businesses attract users who care about how they look and feel. With regard to physical facilities, both businesses require changing rooms and showers. But the similarities end there. The challenges facing these “mixed marriages” are numerous.

Many basics of the ideal fitness club experience and the ideal day spa experience are fundamentally different. If these differences are not understood and reconciled by club and spa designers, they will erode customer/member satisfaction and ultimately compromise the long-term success and economic viability of the partnership.

The Rule of Ambience

Athletic and fitness clubs are active, high-energy environments, where a certain level of noise and distraction is expected. Social interaction and vigorous behavior are common. The day spa, on the other hand, requires a serene, restful atmosphere. The spa patron is looking for isolation and solitude as he or she enjoys the connection of mind, body and spirit in the massage room. The successful designer will be mindful of these distinctions, as planning issues such as location, access, adjacency, and circulation are identified and resolved with sensitive consideration toward the patron’s experience. Clubs often try to link a day spa with their existing locker rooms for changing and showering. The initial appearance of efficiency with shared use of locker rooms may be outweighed by the resulting clash of ambience. *Rule: Once admitted to the spa environs, a patron must not be exposed to the high energy action of the fitness club until the desired treatment and recovery are complete.*

The Rule of Membership

A basic principle of athletic clubs is that facility access is limited exclusively to members and their guests. Conversely, a day spa must draw its patrons from a larger regional customer base than the population of club members. Most successful day spas located in clubs will find fifty percent of their volume from the local, non-member population. A spa that is internal to the members-only area of the club will be handicapped in its ability to attract non-member patronage. Club staff will be forced to manage a steady flow of non-members into the member-only sector. *Rule: The spa gateway should be located in the public sector of the*

club, adjacent to and visible from the flow of members and non-members through the public lobby.

The Rule of Business Hours

It is likely that the spa will have shorter hours of operation than the club. This means that the spa location and layout must allow it to be closed down and secure even as the surrounding club facility remains open. *Rule: The spa gateway, while open and inviting during business hours, must be completely securable after hours.*

The Rule of Image

Given the differences between clubs and spas, the sensory image of each domain must be recognized and differentiated. Obviously, visual characteristics such as color, material, texture and lighting can be manipulated to good effect, but there are other senses to be stimulated, as well. *Rule: The senses of sight, touch, sound, smell, and taste should always be explored in defining the distinct and separate design "images" of club and spa. To reinforce this distinction, it is important to give the spa its own identity and name as a destination in itself.*

The Rule of Quiet

As mentioned before, a good day spa is quiet. A good club is bound to be noisy. The spa within a club must be protected from the intrusion of unwelcome noise. This diligence applies regardless of whether the noise comes from above, below, or to the side. It is also possible for noise sources from within the spa to be a problem. *Rule: Every partition, floor and ceiling throughout the spa environment must be studied and detailed for proper acoustic performance, relative to adjacent uses and sources of noise and vibration.*

The Rule of Service

Staff and supplies related to spa services are very different from their athletic club counterparts. A spa facility with six treatment rooms may well have staffing needs for seven or eight FTEs. These people need a place to be between service sessions. They need a place separate from club staff to do paperwork, order supplies, book appointments and prepare treatments, as well as develop programs and do marketing. *Rule: Storage, prep and staff accommodation for spa-related operation must be planned as separate and distinct from athletic/fitness needs.*

The Rule of Rules

All rules have exceptions, and the design rules cited here are no different. The important point of all this talk about rules is that the design process becomes an open, intelligent and farsighted dialogue among designer, owner, operator and user. The result of that dialogue will be a club-based day spa facility that fits, like a glove, the unique circumstances of your building, on your site, in your market, and within your budget.

Any time a spa is retro-fitted into an existing club building there are bound to be compromises. It is the collective wisdom of all project stakeholders, including the designer, that will inevitably produce a superior result.

THE END