

With everything from dry cleaning to dog grooming going mobile, it's only natural that the mobile spa concept has caught on over the past several years. "The mobile spa phenomenon is answering the call of time-constrained clients who must have convenience," says Kristina Schuff, co-owner of Puur Spa, a San Diego-based mobile spa that serves local clients and helps other spas across the country open and market their own mobile businesses.

Mobile spa services are particularly popular among brides-to-be, stay-at-home moms, corporate employers and groups of girlfriends, offering these clients a variety of treatments provided at their homes and backyards, workplaces, hotel suites, party venues, weddings and more. For the spa operator, a mobile business offers low overhead, increased income and the opportunity to provide fun client experiences.

If you're planning to embark upon your own mobile spa adventure, take some helpful advice from spas already on the go before you hit the road.

By Andrea Sercu

upwardly mobile

Courtesy Girls Nite In



A mobile spa has to work harder to offer a service that clients can't find anywhere else.

The Mobile Menu

Spa owner Judy Farrar wanted to work with her daughter, a massage therapist, but there wasn't enough physical space at About Serenity, her one-room facility in Ojai, California. So she started thinking outside the box—literally—and took her services directly to people's backyards and poolsides with her on-the-side mobile business, Girls Nite In. "Now I can expand without the overhead," she notes.

Farrar was amazed to discover how many mobile spa businesses have sprung up throughout the country, both in large cities and small towns. Luckily, no one else was offering the service in Ojai, a small artist enclave north of Los Angeles whose residents have lots of disposable income.

Tammy Butler, co-owner of Pamper

Perfect Mobile Nail Spa in Wilmington, Delaware, had been doing nails for about 13 years when one year ago she too decided to take her business on the road. Today she offers mobile services to individuals and parties of 5 to 12 people from Delaware to Maryland with a range of treatments, including manicures and pedicures, facials, massages, bridal services, hair, yoga instruction and even exotic body painting for bachelorette parties.

Both Farrar and Butler have found creative niches with their mobile service menus. Girls Nite In offers unique body treatments, such as a Chocolate Crème Bliss and Body Butter Treatment, performed in a unique silk tent cabana that can be set up virtually anywhere to bring the spa experience outdoors. Pamper

Perfect's hallmark is its customized fruit packages, such as citrus treatments that incorporate fresh lemons, limes and citrus oils gathered from an on-site recipe bar and then used in body scrubs, salt glows and nail services. The service is further complemented by the serving of citrus-themed foods.

Food is the unique selling point that differentiates Safari Day Spa's mobile service from its mainstay brick-and-mortar operation in Milford, Pennsylvania. For \$650, owner Gisela DiCarlo will bring a Thai chef to a couple's home, where he will cook them a custom meal while they're enjoying their massages. DiCarlo feels that a mobile spa has to work harder to offer a service that clients can't find anywhere else, but the effort is worthwhile. "We've had more calls for mobile services than we can accommodate," she says. "I'm now thinking about selling the spa and just going mobile."

Have Staff, Will Travel

Most owners agree that having the right staff is the most important—and sometimes the most challenging—element of running a mobile spa. A mobile therapist often works alone and therefore must be entrusted to protect your spa's hard-earned reputation.

Butler says that her Pamper Perfect therapists have been easy to attract. "People are excited that they can keep their regular jobs and do this part time on the evenings and weekends," she notes. Butler attends job fairs every quarter, networks with supply stores and advertises in trade journals to recruit personnel.

Most mobile spa operations require the owners to scout all resources available to them to find good staff. To keep up with the 20 calls for individual services and eight calls for spa



Courtesy Pamper Perfect



Courtesy Pamper Perfect

Elegance doesn't need to be sacrificed just because services take place outside a spa setting.

parties every week, Kendra Patton, co-owner of Atlanta Spa Service, Atlanta, recruits from the cosmetology school at which she trained. The students must be at least three-quarters of the way through their schooling before they become eligible for recruitment, she says.

Mobile therapists are typically independent contractors and as such, must operate as individual businesses with respect to finances. That means they

need to track their own mileage and incidental expenses, and must receive a 1099 from the spa business. This arrangement helps most mobile spas compensate at a high commission rate. Pamper Perfect pays its therapists and technicians a 50% to 60% commission—not an uncommon rate for mobile spas.

Both the mobile spa owner and the staff members need to obtain their own limited liability insurance policies, which can usually be acquired for as little as \$150 a year through the American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA) or some other private or trade organization. “I didn’t realize that the policy I already had for my spa wouldn’t cover me ‘out there,’” says Farrar, who purchased \$2 million worth of limited liability coverage for \$230 a year.

In terms of legalities, be aware that some states require you to have an existing spa facility before you can offer mobile services. To be sure, check with your state’s spa licensing board for laws and policies and make sure your business license is up to date and valid on the road; in some cases, you may need more than one license. Patton has a business license to travel within Atlanta’s Fulton County, but she pays extra fees to do business in outlying counties. And in some states where massage therapy is governed by the county, such as California, massage therapists are required to purchase licenses for each county in which they operate.

Mobile spa owners should also consider a legal contract to further protect them in the event of accidents, breakage or damage that doesn’t involve gross negligence. Consult your attorney for help in drawing up such a contract.

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Dos and Don'ts of Going Mobile

DO collect money prior to an event. Nothing diminishes the fun of a spa party faster than talk of finances. You’ll also avoid any financial fallout that may arise from discrepancies, such as guest no-shows. Most mobile spa owners require a nonrefundable deposit at the time of booking, with the balance paid prior to the party.

DON'T let a therapist go on a call solo if the client is a total stranger. “Ask the client to come to the spa first,” suggests Gisela DiCarlo, owner of Safari Day Spa and mobile service, Milford, Pennsylvania. “The mobile business is a risky thing, and different rules apply.” Kendra Patton, owner of Atlanta Spa Service in Atlanta, lets her husband do all the booking to prescreen any questionable clients. When she goes on an individual call alone, she brings a cell phone while he stations himself near the location.

DO make sure you can arrive early to set up. Sometimes a facility such as a hotel won’t open a room until the start time of services. By the time you set up, you’re running late, and some guests may not receive services within the allotted hours. Make sure your clients know in advance that you must have access to the premises 30 to 40 minutes ahead of time for proper setup.

DON'T send out any willing therapist just because you’re in a pinch. Dwin Ngo, owner of Eden Spa & Salon, a Redondo Beach, California-based freestanding spa with a side mobile business, recommends sending only those therapists whom you know well. “I do this to uphold the standards of what a client would expect if she were to come into my facility,” she says.

DO make sure everybody attending a spa party is given an agenda and knows what treatments he or she will be receiving. “This way, everything stays consistent and organized,” Patton says.



Courtesy Pamper Perfect

A Moving Environment

Mobile spa therapists can turn an otherwise simple on-call massage into a spa experience by providing the special touches of an onsite spa treatment. Candles, music, aromatherapy, end tables, pillows and fabric coverings all help transform a drab setting into a spa-like environment. Pamper Perfect provides robes and slippers and, depending on the event and theme, even supplies balloons or fresh flowers.

Keep in mind that a long walk—or worse, a long flight of stairs—will seem even longer if your equipment isn't lightweight, portable and, ideally, on wheels. DiCarlo carries her oils, candles and disposable sheets in two large rolling cases, as well as a massage chair, and heating and cooling units. Patton makes sure that her nail technicians pack proper sanitation and disinfection supplies. She also carries a lightweight turkey roaster for storing hot stones for massage, rubber bowls for mixing products and collapsible stools with shoulder straps. Because her menu offers lots of body treatments, including mud, seaweed and salt, Patton brings along plenty of disposable plastic sheeting, which she rolls out on the floor beneath her treatment table.

Candles, music and fabrics transform a drab setting into a spa-like environment.

Farrar found out early on that mobile services call for a certain electrical capacity to accommodate all of her equipment. "I didn't realize how many amps are being pulled," she notes. To avoid overloading a circuit breaker and, consequently, pulling the plug on a party, Farrar took measures such as exchanging her roaster pans with small microwave ovens, which not only use fewer amps, but also take a fraction of the time to heat massage stones.

The service space needs to be large enough to accommodate the treatment and must have running water. For a massage, the room should be 10 by 10 feet. Body treatments may call for shower facilities. If that isn't possible, or you don't want to be responsible for the cleanup (and potential liability) of the shower, you may choose to use hot towels as an alternative cleanup method, as Farrar does.

It's best to survey the space before committing to a spa party.



Courtesy Pamper Perfect



Courtesy Pamper Perfect

The mobile approach allows for a relaxed, informal atmosphere for group services.

Farrar visits sites in advance to check for adequate electrical outlets, an outdoor space to set up her portable cabana and an alternative indoor option in case of inclement weather. Before an event, she faxes her client a copy of the menu, an order form, terms and agreements, and a release of liability. "Then I go to the site of the event to discuss all of it," she says.

Booking to Go

Schedule your mobile spa services allowing enough time for travel, heavy traffic, and breakdown and setup of equipment. Patton allows herself up to two hours between parties, figuring it takes about 30 minutes to break down, up to one hour to travel to her next

destination, and 30 minutes in advance of the party for setup. To avoid booking conflicts and ensure there are enough therapists on hand, most mobile services encourage clients to book at least one to two days in advance.

The "mobile" aspect of mobile spas also calls for carefully structured fees. Many mobile spas add a flat travel premium or percentage to the service cost rather than charge clients a per-mile fee. Eden Spa & Salon, Redondo Beach, California, for instance, adds a \$30 premium to its mobile massages, facials and other services.

Other spas require a minimum purchase to take their services on the road. Safari Day Spa requires a \$100 service minimum to travel within a 25-mile radius; Girls Nite In's minimum is \$500 plus a 15% gratuity. Atlanta Spa Service's Patton typically travels 30 to



Courtesy, Pjur Spa



Courtesy, Pjur Spa

Mobile spa services enable the therapist to create the ideal setting for each client.

40 minutes from her home base for a service, but if she needs to travel farther—up to a maximum of 50 miles—she charges an additional \$10 or \$15 to cover gas.

DiCarlo reminds owners to implement a good system for record-keeping to log mileage and to keep receipts for tax purposes. “Much of this business is done in cash,” she reminds.

Finally, make sure you keep your mobile spa business’s finances separate from those of your mainstay spa operation. Farrar reprogrammed her credit card machine to avoid the commingling of funds, and set up separate checking accounts.

Marketing Mobile

Despite the increase in the number of mobile spas popping up across the United States, the concept is still new to clients. The right marketing mix will help you alert the local public about your mobile spa business.

Carolyn McNairn, owner of Mobile Beauty, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, suggests giving existing clients incentives to refer your business. “Often, one party of a group of four women will grow into four groups of four women and so on,” she says. Patton uses direct-mail pieces that offer 20% discounts for repeat customers and 50% discounts for referrals.

Many businesses, including caterers, wedding planners, party planners and bridal boutiques, are more than willing to refer your mobile spas to their clients and customers. Pamper Perfect, which offers

Patton targets potential clients with her website.

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spa packages for young girls, partnered with a local dance school to get the word out. Eden Spa & Salon generates many referrals from its neighboring restaurant and bridal store. Eden owner Dwin Ngo also has realized a great deal of business from cultivating relationships with concierges at local hotels. The referrals allow

hotel guests to sample services the hotels may not be able to provide.

For Safari Day Spa's DiCarlo, the best marketing tool has been her safari-themed van with her website address and 800 number emblazoned on the side. "I spent more than \$2,000 on advertising over a two-month period, yet when I asked my clients how they knew about me, they said they saw my van or went to my website, or both," she says.

In the beginning, Atlanta Spa Service's Patton passed out postcards and offered chair massages at bridal shows, which helped put this mobile service on the map. "During the wedding season, people book spa parties like crazy," she says. Now, Patton targets potential clients with her website, which she says accounts for about 75% of all her calls.

"The Internet is a huge platform for marketing mobile services," notes Schuff. She advises hiring a search engine operator to optimize your site with keywords that will direct Web surfers to your home page.

In the end, some of the best marketing comes from the spa parties themselves. "When you provide services at an event, people are right there and they often need to book you for something next month," says Patton. "It's great for generating more business."

You can also check out one of the available spa marketing resources, such as those offered by Puur Spa (www.mobilehomespa.com) and mobileSPA (www.mobilespa.com). For a fee, these businesses will provide website design, customized press releases, pricing strategies and CDs detailing effective ways to promote your services. ♦

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