

By Katie O'Reilly

Critical Mass

Your expert-approved crash course on inviting, handling and resolving client complaints

IF VISIONS OF ENRAGED PATRONS SPINNING TALES of atrocious service haunt your dreams, you may be surprised to learn that most industry experts view client complaints as gifts wrapped in ugly packages. In fact, Angela Cortright, DAYSPA advisory board member and owner of Spa Gregorie's (www.spagregories.com), which has three Southern Californian locations, considers malingers personal consultants.

"It says something when a guest trusts you enough to bring an issue to your attention," she explains. "It means they have enough regard for your business to address it, rather than just walk away."

It's the grievances you *don't* know about that can hurt you. After all, for each dissatisfied client

who complains to a business owner or manager, 26 others keep their mouths shut, according to a report from the U.S. Office of Consumer Affairs. What's more, an unhappy guest will vent about her bad experience to an average of nine other people. Conversely, when complaints are graciously addressed, 70% to 90% of guests come back.

As you enjoy the fruits of a strengthening economy and heavier warm-weather traffic, keep in mind that a busier and more sophisticated operation leaves more room for things to go wrong. DAYSPA checked in with spa management experts for insightful tips on turning even the most frustrated malcontents into loyal clients.

Inviting Feedback

It's important that when something goes awry, guests feel they *can* complain about it—and be heard. At Spa Gregorie's, Cortright's name, photo and signature appear on all printed collateral, and receipts invite clients to provide feedback to a specific email address.

"It's important to attach a face and name to all aspects of your business so that people feel connected and know that their feedback will reach a human," she explains. "We want to provide my assurance of standards of quality, so I always try to be accessible."

Owners can open that channel just by *being there*: Introduce yourself to clients, engage them in conversation and invite guests to directly contact you with any needs, questions or concerns about their spa experience.

Other vehicles for dialogue include comment cards, post-treatment email surveys and online feedback forms. Dori Soukup, founder and CEO of consulting giant InSPARATION Management (www.insparationmanagement.com), reminds us that it's never sufficient to have a receptionist ask a guest who's already checking out how he or she enjoyed the service. "People will say it was 'fine,' because they don't feel comfortable telling you about the lousy massage they got," she says. "And



they also won't want to fill out a guest feedback survey there. You should send it as an email, along with an incentive to fill it out, perhaps a coupon for a treatment upgrade."

Keep in mind, today's guests are likely to maintain open dialogue with another source—online review forums such as Yelp, City Search and Yahoo. "Spa owners should opt-in on these sites to see what guests are saying about their operation," suggests Felicia Brown, *DAYSPA* advisory board member and owner of Spalutions! (www.spalutions.com), a longstanding industry marketing resource. "You can also respond quickly to negative online reviews to let the reviewer and other readers know why the problem occurred, how it was resolved and why it won't be an issue in the future," she adds.

Coping with Criticism

That brings us to the next step: processing and responding to negative feedback. Nobody likes to be a disgruntled guest's punching bag, but as long

as your team members are trained to stay calm, establish a sympathetic connection and hear out the dissatisfied client, solutions will be reaped.

Soukup suggests implementing a staff-wide protocol. "First, you should sit down with the guest in a discrete area to show you're really listening," she explains. "Let him or her vent, without interruption. Write down the feedback so the guest feels like you're really going to do something about it."

Brown urges professionals to stress that staff members must not take gripes personally. "Though a guest's initial frustration or anger may be directed at you, remember that such emotions are generally a result of another situation—perhaps one that doesn't even involve your spa," she says. "By removing yourself and your own emotions from the scenario, you'll be more capable of seeing the situation clearly and keeping a cool head."

Experts' tips for maintaining composure include taking deep breaths, smiling, expressing empathy

and keeping this in mind: You're seeking to resolve the issue, not the emotion.

"Listen, and collect your thoughts before speaking," Brown advises. "Then ask questions to be sure you understand the complaint. Sympathize and acknowledge the problem and the client's right to be frustrated; then offer assurance that your goal is to work with them to find a solution."

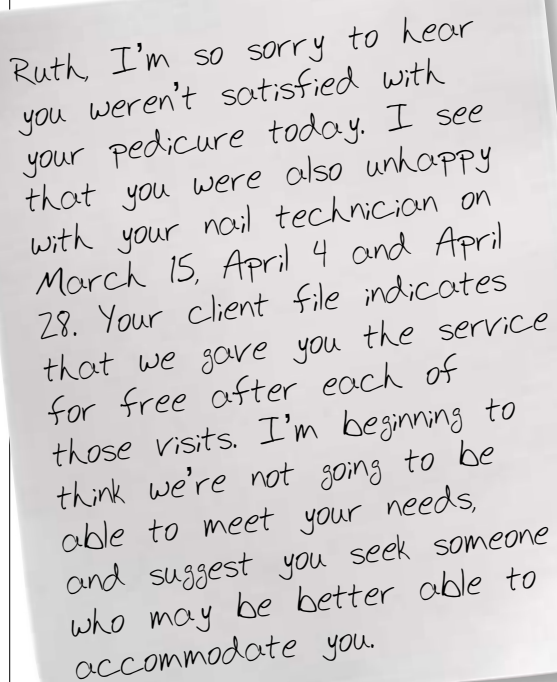
Soukup recommends empowering all employees to patch up situations themselves, so they don't have to run

When Griping Goes Too Far

The first time someone complains, it's best to assume the grievance is merited. But what to do when faced with repeat guests who strategically whine for personal or monetary gain? Fortunately, there are ways to foolproof your operation against chronic complainers—and even "break up" with problematic patrons.

The ace up your sleeve is your guest record system. "If you document every complaint in a client's file, as well as their *own* infractions—no shows, late arrivals, etc.—then you'll have a much better idea of who could be a problem client," says Felicia Brown, owner of marketing firm Spalutions! (www.spalutions.com).

Ready to say so long to a repeat offender? Brown suggests a polite, but firm, conversation or note along these lines:



Ruth, I'm so sorry to hear you weren't satisfied with your pedicure today. I see that you were also unhappy with your nail technician on March 15, April 4 and April 28. Your client file indicates that we gave you the service for free after each of those visits. I'm beginning to think we're not going to be able to meet your needs, and suggest you seek someone who may be better able to accommodate you.

Problem solved.

Keep this in mind: You're seeking to resolve the issue, not the emotion.

off and get a manager. "It won't do you any favors to make clients feel that addressing their grievance is a bureaucratic process."

Brown suggests offering each

staff member an allowance of up to \$25 per week to remedy problems on his or her own. Depending on the scenario, the money could be used for a discount, a free prod-



uct or a service. "It's a worthwhile investment to ensure the happiness of someone who is—or could become—a lifetime client," she says. "And consider that a guest who leaves displeased may 'invest' way more than that in terms of energy spent sharing their 'pain and suffering' with the masses."

Cortright typically opts to give complainers credit for a signature treatment at Spa Gregorie's. "Incentive for a future visit brings guests back and grants us an opportunity to show them what we're really capable of."

Keep in mind, however, that most people who complain aren't looking for a handout. Before piling on the presents, Soukup suggests this straightforward tactic: "Ask unhappy guests, 'What can I do to make it up to you?' In most cases, they'll say 'nothing,' and that they just wanted you to know about it. At that point, you can apologize, perhaps offer a small condolence gift, learn from it and move on." (For more tips on patching up dicey situations without giving away the store, see "When Gripping Goes Too Far," page 99.)

No matter who handles the situation, though, details should be shared with management, and the owner should follow up with a written note of apology to the client.

Live and Learn

Now that you've invited and handled complaints, it's time to switch gears and safeguard your operation

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against repeat laments. Scrupulous record keeping is your starting point. Document every issue in a client's file, or have a reminder come up with that guest's name in your spa's computer system. "The owner or manager should receive a daily or weekly report on all issues, along with details on how they were handled, so they can follow up with clients and staff members as needed," Brown says.

If any business protocol changes are made as a result of the complaint, inform the guest about them. This will further engage her in the solution. "Sometimes a negative issue is a good reason to get the whole staff together to review standard operating procedures," Cortright says, adding that while it's important for management to periodically revisit ugly scenarios with employees, "you don't want to address all the past issues at once. Staff meetings should be a positive experience." Accordingly, Spa Gregorie's powwows often involve role-playing, with rewards for those who handle hot-tempered "customers" exceptionally well.

The most important thing to remember, especially when bearing the brunt of guest vexation, is that client complaints are an inevitable part of running a service-oriented business. And if you're *not* privy to the occasional grievance, it's time to take a closer look at your day spa's retention rate. "If it's low," Soukup warns, "then you may have a lot of close-lipped, unhappy people." ●

Katie O'Reilly is *DAYS*PA's senior editor.