

The Challenge of Building a Successful Spa Staff

Becky Zwickl, owner Becky's Day Spa in Scottsbluff, Nebraska

Becky Zwickl is an energetic and enterprising licensed massage therapist (LMT) raising a family and running a thriving spa business that, so far, has beat out all the local competition in Scottsbluff, Nebraska, including a well-funded medical spa start-up. Zwickl began her massage therapy career more than 10 years ago working in the back half of a garage. She kept growing her business until, in her words, "I just couldn't take any new clients, because I only had that small space and a fixed number of hours in the day. When it got to that point, I sought out other people to work with. First, a nail tech; then, another. Now I have 13 practitioners at 12 stations and treatment rooms, plus three receptionists. We've also opened a second location in a nearby town with a total of 6,400 square feet, including a full salon."

All of this growth and success has been great for Zwickl, but along the way she has experienced challenges she never dreamed of. "One of the biggest problems I didn't see coming was internal competition among the employees," she says. "As LMTs, we are into making people feel better, but when you open a spa and add cosmetologists, estheticians, and nail techs into the mix, it becomes a completely different setting. I always thought the external competition with other businesses would be the big thing, but it was the internal competition among employees that ended up being the bigger problem."

Zwickl says her big mistake was basing her success on the happiness of her employees at first. "I always wanted to make them happy," she says. "Sometimes LMTs are the worst bosses because we want to make nice and smooth everything over." What has Zwickl done to counteract this tendency? "I've gotten meaner. And I've gotten rid of my biggest delusion—thinking that employees are going to stay with me forever. I've found that you need to empower your name, your brand, not the names of the therapists working for you. Every time I promoted them in the local paper, etc., I was building their names, not my spa's name. I don't do that any more."

Zwickl says another thing she should have known is not to become friends with your employees. "It becomes impossible for them to respect you if they see you make bad decisions in your personal life," she says. "You totally lose credibility. And getting close to them personally clouds your ability to make a decision about what's best for the business, as compared to what's best for your buddy who happens to work for you."

There is no shortage of mistakes that Zwickl cautions other therapists to avoid when opening a spa of their own. "One of the stupidest things I did was hiring out of desperation when someone left the spa," she says. "Don't do it. Don't make decisions out of fear. If someone says, 'I'll leave if you don't do this for me,' then let them leave. And don't pay them too highly out of fear that they'll leave. Once you become clear about the value of your own business, people will stay anyway. I haven't lost anyone in three years, and some of the best therapists I have now are the ones I got after my so-called shining stars left. I wouldn't have had these great employees if I'd been too afraid to say goodbye to people whom I once thought of as indispensable."

Zwickl says another "no-no" is sharing your future business plans with employees. "My business plan ended up at a medical spa a little while after an employee of mine left," she says. "That made me feel a little different about trusting people. And what was worse, I've had employees pocketing cash from my business. One way it happens is they make it look on the computer like they've canceled an appointment with someone who paid cash. With more than 100 people a day coming through our doors, it's hard for me to keep track of every appointment. But now I've found ways of preventing this, of putting up firewalls, and we've been able to catch someone red-handed doing this. To say the least, I was naive about certain things."

Zwickl says that opening her spa has been a huge commitment in both time and money. "In fact," she says, "If I'd known everything I didn't know before opening a spa, I might not have done it in the first place. I've had many 80-hour weeks, and on top of it I take work home with me. When I used to work at another spa, I always wondered why the owner was so stressed out. Now I know. It's the overhead and unforeseen costs. When I first

started, my overhead was \$200–\$300 a month. My average now is \$15,000–\$20,000. If I had known I would be spending this much when I started, it would have freaked me out.”

Zwickl has a few last words of advice for therapists who would be spa owners. “Don’t let your success go to your head immediately,” she says, “because you have to maintain it over the long run. It could be all gone tomorrow. You have to stay constant and don’t get too big for your own britches.

On the other hand, don’t let your failures get you down. There were so many times something devastating happened and I wanted to quit, but I ended up finding out that your moments of weakness are when you find your strength. Don’t quit. So many people don’t realize how close they are to success. You just need to make that one last push to get over the hill. Then you’re there.”