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Spameeting EMEA 2015, Dubai, kicks off with panel discussion: Design in Spa

BY Helen Andrews



Spameeting EMEA 2015 kicked off yesterday (6 December) with an afternoon conference programme at the Meydan Hotel in Dubai, UAE. Spameeting is a two and a half day event that allows buyers and suppliers in the spa industry to connect and do business.

The conference comprised four panel discussions and was led by Daniella Russell, spa development and operations director of spa consultancy Soul Spa Concepts, and sponsor Sammy Gharieni – founder and CEO of Gharieni, luxury spa and medical equipment manufacturer.

The first discussion's topic was 'Design in Spa'. Panellists for this talk included Kathryn Moore (formerly group director of spa of MSPA International and now founder of Spa Connectors), Helen Coulon of Soul Spa Concepts, Clive McNish of GOCO Hospitality, Victor Fieldgrass of EF Medispa, Lindsay Madden-Nadeau of FRHI and Paul Hawco of Jumeirah Group.

Speakers debated what the best formula for determining the size of a spa is, but noted that often there are many variables to consider and the design is frequently created before feasibility studies have been conducted.

McNish noted that some of the world's leading brands have spa policies that haven't moved on and they continue to put spas in hotel basements as an afterthought. Another issue for McNish is that sometimes, particularly in Asia, an owner or developer funds the creation of a spa as a pet project for his or her son or daughter. These spas are in great locations, but the new decision-maker – the son or daughter – also weighs in on the decisions on design, which can complicate the project as it moves forward.

The resounding message from the panel was that there's no one-size-fits-all for spa design because each site depends on the local market, viable space and facilities required – among other factors.

For corporate hotel spa chains, such as FRHI, they have brand standards to work towards – based on the number of guests and whether the location is a leisure

destination or corporate mix.

Madden-Nadeau highlighted that timing is important. She has been working with Andrew Gibson at FRHI on projects for two years on existing projects that were designed and built before they became part of the team. The influence over design decisions that she and Gibson have is minimal at these later stages.

"To meet brand guidelines and create all the necessary touch points for guests in the spa it's quite difficult if the space can't meet these needs – so some properties fall short of brand standards," said Madden-Nadeau.

Moore agreed: "If 80-90 per cent of revenue is derived from massage, why take up the space with services, experiences and technology that won't necessarily deliver the same revenue. We need to think about where we spend our money. Technology might be good for PR, but it's not going to make you generate the revenue you need at the end of the day."

Russell asked panellists if spa menus are changing and the consensus is that they are getting smaller, to become less complicated.

Madden-Nadeau said long menus are too complicated for guests and also for therapists – it can be expensive to train therapists in numerous protocols, especially if retention is low.

"We're being more clever with our menus by shortening them and focusing on high-selling ones to help our profitability and make it easier for us from a training perspective too.

McNish added that spa menus need to reflect the customs of where the spa is located: "You avoid the restaurant that does Greek, Thai, Chinese, Italian and French food – so your spa should specialise too, like a Michelin star restaurant."

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