

More Precise Understanding of Hotel Spa Attractiveness Needed in Hong Kong

Hotel spa facilities are becoming ever more important to inbound travellers in Hong Kong, observe the SHTM's Dr Deniz Kucukusta, Ms Loretta Pang and Ms Sherry Chui in a research paper. Yet hoteliers know little about exactly what these potential guests are looking for in hotel spas.

Having conducted a survey of inbound travellers, the researchers found that the demographics of spa seekers are changing, although relaxation, pampering and beautification are still the understandable main reasons for visiting hotel spas. With "professional skills, product and service knowledge, sense of privacy, range of facilities, and product branding" identified as the most important criteria for hotel spa selection, the researchers suggest that Hong Kong hotels can now "allocate resources more economically and efficiently to meet and satisfy the needs of their targeted markets".

The Rise of the Hotel Spa

Burgeoning interest in health and wellness along with a shift in emphasis from "passive cures for ailments to the proactive maintenance of one's well-being" has led to the inexorable rise of the spa industry, the researchers observe. Hotels have been quick to catch on, adding hotel spas to a list that also includes day, club and cruise spas. Industry statistics show that more than 90% of the world's luxury resort hotels now boast spas, and the figure for high-tariff A hotels in Hong Kong is 100%.

The researchers point out that Hong Kong is among the 20 largest spa-going locales worldwide in terms of revenue, and hotel spas account for 30% of its total spa market. The Hong Kong Tourism Board estimates that the average spa/health club revenue per available hotel room is HK\$3,533. Yet despite these impressive figures, hoteliers have been largely in the dark about customers' spa choice. As the researchers note, "to become a preferred hotel spa provider in Hong Kong, hoteliers must understand consumer needs and the underlying selection criteria".

The traditional spa goer – or at least the stereotype of one – is an upper-class woman with ample funds and

leisure time. However, the "current wave of consciousness about health and wellness has changed the spa market considerably", the researchers write, and the demographic is shifting. One-third of spa-goers are now men. They are also getting younger, and are not necessarily well-off. Consumers in different demographic categories are likely to have different preferences and selection criteria.

Identifying Potential Hotel Spa Visitors

The researchers thus set out to "gain insight into how demographic factors and travel characteristics affect spa-related decisions". Having first conducted exploratory interviews with hotel spa professionals and hospitality academics, they developed a questionnaire for inbound tourists in Hong Kong.

Potential spa visitors were identified at Hong Kong International Airport and on the Avenue of Stars near the Tsim Sha Tsui waterfront, and interviewed face-to-face. Slightly more than half were men, just over half were aged 18-27 and most were university graduates. The interviewees had a fairly wide range of income levels, although very few were in the upper-income bracket. Almost half were leisure visitors, and a third were visiting Hong Kong on business. Roughly half had visited hotel spas before.

Why Visitors Select Spas

The interviewees revealed that their three most important reasons for hotel spa visits were relaxation, pampering and beautification. In actually deciding to use spas they were most heavily influenced by the therapists available, prices and product, and treatment types. Breaking this down further, the researchers note that the most important selection criteria were professional skills, product and service knowledge, sense of privacy, range of facilities and product branding.

In essence, staffing decisions are very important. The researchers emphasise that "finding the right therapists with adequate qualifications is one of the challenges of the spa industry". Neglecting this area can negate hard work in other areas. Unsurprisingly, price was a greater issue for lower-income groups, but important to all. The

researchers thus recommend that “treatment prices should be set according to the calibre and category of the hotel”. Other potential price-related options tailored to higher-income groups are loyalty programmes and treatment packages.

The spa product itself is also significant, both in terms of the treatments on offer and the products used in those treatments. “Branded spa products might guarantee quality and provide extra value and prestige”, the researchers note. They also comment that distinctive products such as Dead Sea oil are attractive to women, whereas younger spa goers seek novelty and choice. Hence, a fruitful direction for Hong Kong hotel spas could be distinctly Chinese treatments such as Zhang-style Chinese massage.

Spas Not Just for Leisure Travellers

The interviewees confirmed that spa facilities were an important factor in their hotel choices. Interestingly, leisure travellers were not alone in this, with business travellers also expressing the desire for a spa experience. This particular set of travellers is often exhausted after a full day of meetings, and more inclined to relax in the hotel than go shopping or sightseeing.

As the researchers put it, “a 50- or 80-minute spa treatment in the hotel is an ideal way for business professionals to unwind”. Hotels would certainly do well to target this captive segment, particularly as business travellers are less cost-conscious than their leisure counterparts. Yet, for all of the travellers that the researchers interviewed, relaxation was far and away the most important reason to visit a hotel spa. A relaxing spa design is thus of the utmost importance.

Capitalising on a Trend

Spas have become an essential part of the travel experience for inbound travellers in Hong Kong. Nearly half the interviewees had been to spas, with a sizable number being “spa enthusiasts” who had visited hotel spas up to 10 times in the past year. Thanks to the researchers, Hong Kong hoteliers now have the necessary knowledge to capitalise on that enthusiasm and deliver the exact spa experiences that various categories of guests are looking for.

Points to Note

- Hong Kong’s hotel spa market is growing rapidly.
- Relaxation, pampering and beautification are the main reasons for inbound travellers visiting Hong Kong hotel spas.
- Spa-goer demographics are shifting towards men, the younger generation and business travellers.
- Overall, in-bound travellers consider spa facilities important in Hong Kong hotels.

Kucukusta, Deniz, Pang, Loretta and Chui, Sherry. (2011) “Inbound Travelers’ Selection Criteria for Hotel Spas in Hong Kong”. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, Vol. 30, No. 6, pp. 557-576.