

THE AMERICAS: CANADA

Canada's spa and wellness industry evolved slowly during with 1980s, with a modest facility and amenity infrastructure in comparison with today's spa operations. Demand was supported by minimally trained staff delivering basic spa services. Fifteen years later the spa culture matured due to more sophisticated and well-travelled clients' demands on domestic day spas. Simultaneously, hotel and resort spas became de rigeur in order to attract guests. By 2000, luxury spa developments emerged — both day and stay spas — to match consumers' escalating market demands for wellness-focussed treatments, leading-edge skincare therapies and multiple day spa/wellness experiences.

1. What is the latest spa and wellness news in your country?

Demand for spa treatments currently exceeds the industry's capacity to deliver consistent excellence due to shortages of skilled labour in both massage therapy and aesthetics in quality-assured spas for their sophisticated clientele. This precludes many quality or "real" spas from operating seven days a week. The term "spa" is much abused and has become a tag line for a huge proliferation of inferior hair and nail studios providing cut-rate services, untrained personnel, and pirated product lines. Sanitation issues surface periodically, get media-exposé coverage, and then the issue dies a natural death until the next slow news cycle prompts an investigative news story once again.

2. The industry is buzzing about wellness technologies. How do you see spa and wellness establishments in your country using wellness technologies now and in the future?

Increased use of technology is inevitable in areas not presently conceived; however, that may not be a good thing for clients, therapists or spa owners. Spas' successes are predicated on therapists' tactile skills and their clients' responses. Good therapists routinely contribute to their clients' well-being through the power of intuitive and responsive human touch that they provide with empathy and a positive attitude. If the power of human

touch is reduced in the delivery of services, the very foundation of wellness therapies is undermined.

3. What is happening in your country in terms of wellness tourism?

The Canadian Tourism Commission “abandoned spa industry support in 2010,” according to Frank Verschuren, product specialist for the Canadian Tourism Commission. However, localized pockets are currently thriving in Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia. The sector is largely fueled by domestic tourism as it’s not a draw for inbound tourism — largely because Canada’s major foreign market is the United States and the dollar exchange-rate has not been attractive to Americans for several years. Canada’s medical tourism continues to be largely an outbound activity.

4. Please provide one sentence that best describes the latest developments in your country for each of these categories:

Wellness tourism in Canada is dependent on the domestic market (See #3) and there is no appreciable recent investment in hotel spas, destination spas, or hot springs spas to expand the wellness spa product offering.

Wellness living communities: In Ontario, key resorts and hotels with golf courses are incorporating spas and wellness programs into amenity attraction packages and activity programs. They target resort/hotel guests of course but investment is designed to lure potential purchasers for the surrounding real estate.

Corporate employee wellness programs thrive only in fast-paced corporate sectors, and often only in short bursts (such as in the finance sector during tax time, by providing chair massages) and/or by subsidizing employee annual memberships at health clubs. Sadly, employee wellness programs are not a priority in Canada — yet.

5. Fast-forward five years and tell us what you think the spa and wellness industry in your country will look like:

Overall, the industry will stabilize with smaller day and stay spa operations. Suppliers will continue to work with employers to train initially, and to teach upgraded treatment protocols as required. However, the integrity of the spa industry is at risk unless there are concerted interventions in key categories:

1) Labour market

Recent graduates' practical skill sets do not equip them to be industry-ready. They lack professionalism and technical skills to perform basic services. They lack communications/interpersonal skills to relate to clientele. They lack important elements of respect, caring and feeling for clients' needs. Their lack of work ethic is accompanied with bad attitude and unrealistic expectations. Their self-absorption spawns chatter about themselves rather than engaging clients in dialogue, and as a result they don't touch clients physically or emotionally.

2) Training institutions, Public and Private

Educators and trainers resist responding to the industry's overall needs, issues and expectations. They focus on selling admissions, not on graduating highly skilled, industry-ready professionals. They resist engaging in dialogue with industry to establish baseline standards. They don't provide enough practical experience for delivery of quality services for today's demanding clientele.

3) Market demand is complex

Today's clients demand top-quality treatments that work while they experience, inter alia: instant stress-reduction to combat escalating anger and intolerance; immediate and obvious physical and emotional benefits; uncompromised and engaging rapport with empathetic therapists, and meaningful dialogue with therapists to talk about their (the clients') needs and issues.

4) Standards or lack thereof

Clients are confronted with numerous options for their spa/wellness services. While some may be tempted to access mass discount coupon promotions (like, for instance, Groupon),

the lack of standards for service and treatment delivery is glaring. Canada's two provinces with the highest population and the most spa offerings are Quebec and Ontario. Years ago, both established inspection protocols against qualifying criteria to acquire accreditation status and more recently, 5-Star Spas of Canada has launched an alliance with the most stringent criteria and inspection protocol anywhere. If the foregoing issues are not addressed by spa operators, clients' physical and emotional needs will be negatively impacted, and will result in decreased demand for services.

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