Massage therapists thinking about opening a spa are a special breed. They are entrepreneurial. They have dreams and visions. They have big plans. And usually, they are passionate about those plans. So passionate, in fact, they often plunge forward headlong toward their goal without first laying the groundwork to ensure success. Fortunately, an entire armada of resources is available to help these therapists make the right decisions. These resources include consultants, trainers, videos, DVDs, books, workshops, magazines, expos, conferences, and more. The challenge is to find the right resources for your particular situation. With so many options available, therapists are often faced with an unexpected problem—information overload.

Most therapists go through a series of five basic stages as they become progressively more interested in opening a spa. Depending on where you are on this spa planning timeline, you will find certain resources to be more helpful than others. The stages include: therapists toying with the idea, therapists on the fence about the idea, therapists ready to move forward, therapists already committed to their spa project, and those in the middle of a spa project who find themselves in need of assistance. As you sift through the resources, you’ll be able to refine your search by focusing first on those items most suited to your stage.

Stage 1. Researching Books And Magazines

Perhaps you have only toyed with the idea of opening a spa, or the idea is on the furthest back burner in your mind. But still, you feel somehow drawn toward the spa industry. The first place to look when you begin exploring the spa world is the many books and magazines available. Many magazines offer inexpensive subscriptions, and you’ll find surprisingly detailed information in their pages. You can spend many hours researching the industry through magazines, getting to know the equipment most spa owners use, the products they offer their guests, the layouts and designs they choose for their space, and more.

If the research you do in spa magazines stimulates your interest further, the next step is to explore the pages of a book or two that will give you some more concrete ideas regarding what it’s really like to operate a spa on a daily basis. Two books in this field, SalonOvations’ Day Spa Operations (Milady, 1996) and SalonOvations’ Day Spa Techniques (Milady, 1996), both by Erica Miller, are quite helpful in this regard.

Stage 2. Learning At A Distance With Videos And DVDs

If the initial research you do through magazines and books leads you to explore further, you may find yourself, like many therapists, excited about opening a spa of your own, but still uncertain. Some moments the idea seems brilliant, while at others it seems like a foolhardy mission doomed for certain failure. You are on the fence, going back and forth, waffling. Therapists at this stage are in a manic-depressive state of mind, sometimes exuberant, sometimes discouraged. This is not the time to invest in an architect or a high-priced consultant. Though you may, in the midst of an exuberant moment, be tempted to hurtle forward and overextend yourself, it is best to pull in the reins a little. The best resources to focus on at this time are videos and DVDs. Visit www.massagevideosales.com for some choices in spa training. Also, try the extensive list of training videos and DVDs at www.newlifesystems.com.
Tools for a Therapist Opening a Spa

Some specific titles that might interest you include: *Day Spa 1* and *Day Spa 2* by Erica Miller, *Spa Stress Relieving Backacial* by Kaite Hurley and Raymond Blaylock, *Ayurvedic Spa Treatments* with Karta Purkh Singh Khalsa, plus *Salt Scrubs and Mud Wraps* produced by Blue Moon Body Treatments. All are available from Massage Warehouse.com.

### Stage 3. Moving Forward With Workshops And Trainings
Eventually, if your interest level remains high and you finally jump off the fence, you’ll enter the ready-to-move-forward stage. At this point, you’ll want to make personal contact with some other professionals who have gone before you and know the ropes. Hiring these professionals on an individual basis can be quite expensive, however. Therefore, most therapists elect to enroll in some kind of workshop or training where they will join others in a learning environment.

#### SPA MAGAZINES

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>MAGAZINE</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
<th>CONTACT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Spa</td>
<td>Spa products and equipment; techniques in skin care, nail, and hair care; business growth; marketing; décor; industry news.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.americanspamag.com">www.americanspamag.com</a></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>866-344-1315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day Spa</td>
<td>Trends, products, equipment, management tools and operations techniques, positioning and marketing, plus legal, regulatory, and financial issues.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.dayspamagazine.com">www.dayspamagazine.com</a></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>800-624-4196</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dermascope</td>
<td>Industry leaders in spas and salons share knowledge and experience on latest trends, equipment, techniques, operating procedures, marketing strategies, legal and financial issues.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.dermascope.com">www.dermascope.com</a></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>800-961-3777</td>
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<tr>
<td>Healing Lifestyles &amp; Spas</td>
<td>Profiles spas and lifestyle choices among spa guests and those interested in wellness.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.healinglifestyles.com">www.healinglifestyles.com</a></td>
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<td>724-465-0643</td>
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<td>Professional Spa</td>
<td>International spa market and global trends.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.professionalbeauty.co.uk">www.professionalbeauty.co.uk</a></td>
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<td>+01371 810 433</td>
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<td>Skin, Inc.</td>
<td>A business guide for face and body care specialists, as well as owners/managers; includes information on finance, retailing, marketing, treatments, and more.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.skininc.com">www.skininc.com</a></td>
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<td>800-469-7445</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spa Finders</td>
<td>Luxury spas and spa bargains explored plus health and medical issues, furnishings and fixtures, day spa news.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.spafinder.com">www.spafinder.com</a></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>866-436-2456</td>
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<td>514-274-0004</td>
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These workshops and training programs can be quite enjoyable because they include an immersion in spa treatments and philosophy. You will not only learn and perform spa modalities, you will also receive them. Depending on your goals, the training you choose will emphasize either hands-on techniques, business development, spa management, or a combination of these.

Before making the investment in one of these programs, make sure you feel strongly about building a spa. Too many therapists get overexcited at this early stage and end up spending more money than they should. They sign up for classes or workshops because it’s the easiest thing to do. Making concrete plans and assessing your current situation is more difficult, but more important.

**Stage 4. Committing To The Spa Industry At Trade Shows And Conferences**

At a certain point, you’ll leave behind all doubts and become fully committed to your spa plans. You’ve passed the Commitment Level Assessment Test (see the box on page 44) with flying colors, and you are making concrete progress in the real world toward creating a spa business. Now is the time to immerse yourself in the spa industry as fully as possible. Too many therapists enter the business as outsiders, afraid or unwilling to join the professional community waiting to guide and assist them.

Believe me, you need all the help you can get, and the help is out there. You just have to know where to look. The best place to begin your exploration of the spa industry is at those events a majority of spa professionals attend. This may sound simple, but with so many trade shows, conferences, and expos out there, you may find it difficult to narrow your choices down to one or two that merit your attendance. Conferences can be expensive, and few therapists have the resources to attend them all. The list on page 45 can help you determine which events are most appropriate and important for your circumstances.

**Stage 5. Getting Assistance From Consultants And Trainers**

Depending on how extensive your spa project is, you may find you need some one-on-one coaching to help you attain your goals. If you are simply converting a massage practice into a sole-practitioner spa, the expense of hiring a consultant or private trainer is probably not warranted. If, however, you are hiring employees, constructing a new facility, or purchasing a significant amount of equipment, you may be in need of your own private expert. Often, therapists only realize this when they are in the middle of their spa project, and the consultant is called at the last minute to help save a failing venture. Consultants can be of service at every stage of spa development; however, I encourage you to explore the various consulting options available as early as possible if you think your project might benefit from this kind of expertise.
Consultants are not cheap. Some work on a monthly-retainer basis, and others charge by the day or by the project, but in any case you should be prepared to spend thousands of dollars. There are three main categories of spa consultants: trainers, full-service consultants, and vendors/suppliers.

**Trainers.** Often, the very same people who teach workshops and offer trainings are also consultants. These individuals are often the most reasonably priced and most willing to work with individual therapists and small business owners. Their primary expertise is often hands-on training, but they can also offer advice on layout, design, purchasing, hiring, and more.

**Full-Service Consultants.** These consultants work primarily with large developers who are building multimillion dollar spas. They offer management training, architectural services, hiring and training services, purchasing, and more. Often, these consultants have worked for years at major spa properties and now help others launch their own larger projects. To discover many of the professionals in this category, visit the International Spa Association (ISPA) website at www.experienceispa.com and look in the Education and Resources section. You'll find more than one hundred spa consultants listed.

**Vendors/Suppliers.** You can also take advantage of the consulting services provided by vendors and suppliers of spa equipment and products. These services are often billed as free, but don’t let that fool you. What it really means is free for people who are spending thousands of dollars on products and equipment. Still, this can be an

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### Assessing Your Level of Commitment

Many therapists have considered opening a spa, or at least expanding their massage services to include spa offerings. The idea, while initially exciting, soon becomes quite daunting. When it becomes apparent how much work is involved, a large number of therapists back away from the challenge, but not before already spending hundreds or even thousands of dollars on training or equipment they did not really need. In order to save time and money, it is important to assess your level of commitment. Take this brief Commitment Level Assessment Test to find out where you stand.

1) Have you put on paper the amount you are capable of spending on your spa plans?   Yes ___    No ___
2) Have you researched your local marketplace, determined how many other spa businesses are in operation, and gotten an idea how successful they are?   Yes ___    No ___
3) Have you visited other spas in your area to determine what customers are looking for and what level of service is provided?   Yes ___    No ___
4) Have you asked other professionals about the challenges of opening a spa business in your area? Yes ___    No ___
5) Have you checked with your local zoning and licensing authorities to determine what, if any, new paperwork you will have to fill out in order to open a spa business? Yes ___    No ___
6) Have you asked about the average pay for therapists and other employees in local spas? Yes ___    No ___
7) Have you begun researching spa retail products and private labeling options, knowing most spas rely on retail sales for a crucial percentage of their income? Yes ___    No ___
8) Have you determined how much square footage you will need and if you can afford it? Yes ___    No ___
9) Have you researched compensation options and determined whether you should pay employees a flat hourly fee or a commission? Yes ___    No ___
10) Do you have a marketing strategy in mind that will emphasize your unique strengths and set you apart from your competition? Yes ___    No ___

You will notice none of the ten points listed here require you spend any money. If you are not willing to address these points, or at least a majority of them, then you need to reassess your level of commitment. Once you are in the midst of opening a spa or expanding your practice into spa modalities, problems will inevitably arise, and it is best to determine your willingness to confront them at an early stage.
If you are going to be spending the money on products and equipment anyway, why not get some consulting with the deal? One word of advice: the consulting you receive from vendors and suppliers will always be prejudiced in favor of the particular products and equipment being offered. Try to make your decisions about your products and equipment before you engage this type of service so you will not be unduly swayed by your consultant’s opinion. Vendor/supplier consultants can also be found on the ISPA website.

Consultants are a mixture of the three types listed above. You may find someone who offers consulting in conjunction with a particular brand of products, but she also works independently and will be glad to help get your spa off the ground, even if you do not purchase those products. You have to find the right fit for your particular circumstances, and to do that, it pays to shop around. Talk to several consultants. Ask for references from past clients. Make your own decisions.

**Your Vision**

Finally, a word of encouragement—l’ve seen hundreds of therapists over the years who have successfully made the switch and opened a spa business of their own. Spas are still booming. With more than twelve thousand in the United States, your clients have more choices than ever when it comes time to receive massage and bodywork services. Therapists who expand into spa services find that, in addition to gaining new clients, they retain clients whom they might have lost to a competing spa. Today’s spas offer much more than mere pampering services, and many of them feature the therapeutic work of highly skilled LMTs. Too many therapists continue to regard spas as second-tier facilities, as far as therapy goes. In my opinion, the most important contribution you can make toward building a successful spa is a shift in your own perceptions regarding what a spa really is. Spas are dynamic. They can be deeply therapeutic.

Now that you know some of the resources available, what steps should you actually take? In a future issue, I will give you a step-by-step timeline of mission-critical tasks if you are actually going forward with the building of a spa. Until then, I hope the contacts and ideas presented in this article will keep you plenty busy as you begin to put together your own unique spa vision. **SBH**

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**Steve Capellini is a noted massage therapist, business trainer, and spa consultant. He’s the author of three texts including The Massage Therapy Career Guide. Capellini has organized and educated massage staffs at some of the top spas in the country. Contact him at steve@royaltreatment.com.**