



GREEN SCENE

By Katie O'Reilly

Green Giant

Green Spa Network founder Michael Stusser weighs in on the industry's green strides—and how spa owners can cater to the client of tomorrow.



IN 1985, LONGTIME ECO-MAVERICK MICHAEL STUSSER FOUNDED OSMOSIS Day Spa Sanctuary (osmosis.com), a Japanese-style retreat in scenic Sonoma County, California. Osmosis was designed as a haven where guests could reconnect to the natural world through organic therapies, inhale spa air that was free of toxins and reflect in outdoor meditation gardens. The staff devised several innovative ways to conserve energy (heat from the attic and cool air from under the building moderate temperature) and compost waste (a worm bin generates organic fare for earthworms out of paper and food garbage), continually nurturing Stusser's vision of an ever-more sustainable operation.

In 2005, Stusser and a handful of like-minded spa professionals created the Green Spa Network (GSN, greenspanetwork.com), a nonprofit trade organization that has quickly built a community of spa owners and spa resource partners committed to a greener tomorrow. Now in its sixth year, with more than 100 member spas, the GSN actively challenges spa owners to deepen their commitment to low-impact business practices, community activism and peer collaboration.

In celebration of our 15th anniversary, *DAYSPA* called on this leader of the green spa movement to discuss the top eco-trends of today and what the future portends for sustainability practices of tomorrow.

DAYSPA: What green practices will we see at spas in the future that we wouldn't believe today?

Michael Stusser: Water recycling will be huge. More spas will use biological filtration systems such as constructed wetlands that collect rainwater for treatments and showers. The water is naturally filtered via beds of gravel filled with plants that cleanse it of contaminants. There's also going to be technology that allows owners to re-use water from pools and hot tubs for spa services; water will never just be drained. And since we'll be living in a post-carbon era, we won't be able to power day spas with gas or oil. Some local governments are already helping small businesses to finance solar power systems. There are even federal refunds for switching to solar power.

What about green treatments of the future?

Your average spa-goer is going to be very aware of the dangers of toxic exposure. Products will have to be squeaky clean. Manufacturers will have to reformulate to eliminate parabens, phthalates and other potentially toxic components. I also think we're going to see a resurrection of botanical medicine and old-wisdom practices such as energy treatments and enzyme facials and soaks.

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Attaching the word 'eco' to everything. Some spa owners throw around all the buzzwords, but the rhetoric doesn't connect with the ingredients they're using. They don't substantiate their claims with authentic green measures, which is why it's crucial to explain exactly what you're doing—and why.

Who's inspiring you right now on the spa circuit?

Rancho La Puerta [rancholapuerta.com] in Mexico has channeled 10% of its profits into creating an environmental learning center for children and a huge community park with soccer fields. Crystal Mountain Resort and Spa [crystalmountain.com]

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in Northern Michigan uses renewable wind energy and is very active in environmental policy. And the Mohonk Spa [mohonk.com] in New York's Hudson River Valley has an amazing green legacy that goes back more than 100 years. It even grows its own food and herbs for massage poultices using sustainable farming traditions.

What was the biggest challenge you faced at Osmosis when you first decided to go green?

Keeping staff on board with energy conservation. People tend to think they're so 'not green' that attempting to do anything would be fruitless. That's the biggest mistake. The important thing is to start somewhere. Gradually, you'll gain momentum. And yes, old habits are hard to break. Our employees' room temperature preferences still vary widely. But we do our best to track water and energy usage, so we can always look at ways to improve.

Any insider secrets to clearing these hurdles?

Get the staff excited about working toward the end goal. Your passion will be contagious. We also created a 'green space' for our guests. It's a small, intimate place where you're not exposed to artificial fragrances or cleaning toxins. That enhances the experience. Remember that you can give guests a comfortable, profound healing experience without opulence, indulgence and waste.

Did you lose any clients to competition as a result of adopting green measures?

On the contrary. We just reviewed over 900 responses from a recent guest survey. Our clients are thrilled about our environmental efforts. It makes them feel really good about coming to our spa.

What's the most important starting point for a spa owner looking to make a few eco-savvy changes?

First, you must engage your staff in forming a deep

intention for your organization. Simply creating a list of action items—print on both sides of paper, avoid Styrofoam cups—is great, but without a deeper understanding of what the exercise is all about, your employees will view it as just

one more to-do list. I recommend that all spa owners create an environmental policy statement and post it on their websites. Ours discusses every step we've taken, why we've done so and how we're addressing each area of concern.

How about the simplest changes to make?

It doesn't require much effort to ensure that your laundry detergents are water-friendly and phosphate-free. Good insulation and weather stripping are the best ways to save energy. Installation of water-conserving showerheads, faucets and toilets makes a huge difference. In our recent Osmosis guest survey, 94% of respondents said that the use of non-toxic cleaning supplies was important to them. I see this as a key factor in protecting the health of employees and guests. Then there's the whole universe of safe ingredients in skincare products, which in my opinion is the most crucial component of any business representing itself as green. Learn about how each ingredient works, and its risks. Then make sure clients know exactly what you're using to treat their skin, and why.

Where does the day spa industry stand in the greater scheme of the green movement?

There's no doubt in my mind that our community has huge potential to affect the culture. Look at the assets: well over 15,000 brick and mortar locations. People visit every day, seeking personal transformation. Each facility is staffed with body workers with a purpose to heal and to reconcile mind, body and soul. We could all be doing so much to help our staffs and guests become better planetary citizens, and also to demonstrate to other service-oriented industries how it's done. ●



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