

The person-in-context and experience mapping principles of environmental psychology enable the reaction of people to the various elements of lighting, colour palette, interior design and service attentiveness to be understood.

Mapping THE SPA EXPERIENCE

BY DR LÁSZLÓ PUCZKÓ

For those of us so dedicated to this industry, it may come as a surprise that most customers are not all that interested in the workings of a spa. Their primary interests are described by the benefits of visiting a spa and using spa services. Any spa developer or operator should always keep in mind one question: why is a customer visiting a spa?

The factors behind spa demand have not really been analysed in great detail—especially considering the principles of interpretation, experience creation and applied psychology.

People have many reasons and motivations that make them a spa customer. These can include physical needs, search for entertainment or social interaction, cultural interest, part of lifestyle or simple curiosity.

Spa customers are basically purchasing experiences. However, experience is very subjective. In order to understand how these experiences are interpreted and what factors can have an influence on them, it is necessary to understand the information-gathering and experience-building process of human beings.

The tool used to gauge personal experience is described in environmental psychology as ‘experience mapping’.

All of the above-mentioned motivations, and many more, could be mapped at any time at a spa. Because different people with different backgrounds and needs are together at the same time, there are many different customer experiences coexisting within the environment. Understanding the psychology behind the customer experience will help you to optimise each customer’s visit.

The main objectives of experience mapping in a spa context are to:

- present customers with a personalised experience;
- influence the behaviour and attitudes of customers toward the



use of certain traditions, rituals, materials, etc. that form the basis of treatments and spa services;

- provide an enjoyable and meaningful experience; and
- increase customer understanding, awareness and the appreciation of their own health.

THROUGH EXPERIENCE MAPPING, the reactions of customers (such as enjoyment, appreciation or relaxation) can be understood and influenced. One of the key principles of environmental psychology is that the reaction of people should not be taken out of their environment, but should be analysed in relation to it. This is the ‘person-in-context’ principle.

All environmental stimuli are consciously or subconsciously categorised by customers, including those that are hardly noticed as well as any that cause extreme reactions. Too much or too little of something—for example colours, noise, too much complexity or not enough content—can equally create unpleasant experiences, and can cause stress or fatigue. Think of it like vitamins A and D—both too little and too much are damaging. This is easily observable with some environmental factors, such as temperature, where both high and low are uncomfortable.

But how do we determine what is too much or what is too little of more complex characteristics? Each spa customer will perceive environmental stimuli differently depending on their attitude, previous experiences and knowledge, physical state and many other parameters. Some people like state-of-the-art design; some prefer a more ‘human’ atmosphere. Some people like designer labels even in the showers, some like traditional taps that are simple to operate. Some people like



to be surrounded by other people; some prefer privacy. To make the issue even more difficult, the preferred level of stimulus of the same person can also be different depending on the context. For example, in the lounge area a person's favourite chill out tune can be enjoyable when played fairly loud, whereas the same volume is found to be very annoying if it's a tune the person doesn't like.

COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY helps us to understand these variations in perception. It posits that individuals relate themselves to the world through a construct of their experiences. Information comes in through the perceptual system and is saved in the visual or sensual stores. The information (e.g. feelings from a massage) is then transferred to short-term memory, from which it activates items (information,



The name and theme of the Römer Therme ('Roman Baths') in Bad Kleinkirchheim, Austria, is not reflected in the igloo-style interior design—which can create a jarring experience for the customer.

experiences, images, etc.) saved in long-term memory. These saved items can either be memories of previous visits, traces of what was learnt from family, elements of social norm, etc. Stored and new information then are linked and understood—a concept called 'chunking'.

Understanding and storing information does not happen simultaneously, but in 'chunks' in which similar or somehow similar-looking information is synthesised and stored in the same clusters. Therapists, for example (perhaps without conscious intention), apply this chunking when they alter their service depending on whether they are treating a woman or a man. References a therapist may use during the treatment can affect the customer's experience greatly—if a therapist relates a benefit that or a person who has direct relevance to the customer, it is more likely that the customer finds the chunk that makes the experience beneficial.

Using the theory of cognitive psychology, experience creators find elements in service provision and interpretive media that somehow relate to what visitors already know. With this approach, interpretation builds on already existing and stored knowledge. This can then lead to the creation of a new chunk or to the extension of an old one stored in long-term memory. Applying these rules to spas, there are creative ways in which spas can present new, exotic, fusion



At Loesium Aveda Wine Spa in Austria, the pattern in the floor of the lounge enhances the visitor's perception by playing off the visuals of the surrounding vineyard as well as providing natural light to the basement.

treatments or products, but, applying the principle of chunking, the introduction of these therapies should build on a known experience to ensure customers feel comfortable with them.

The process of chunking information in the brain very much depends on the senses through which the customer has actually received it. It is understood that, on average, people retain:

- 10% of what they hear;
- 30% of what they read;
- 50% of what they see; and
- 90% of what they do.

This leaves spas with the special challenge of a very high recollection rate, since spa services generally include a physical experience—a memory of some 90 per cent of which is retained! We also know that people primarily process visual information, therefore messages structured around some simple visuals are the most efficient familiarising form of education. (Makes it worth considering what your clients are looking at while facing the floor during massage or the ceiling during a facial.)

Another consideration: People are able to recognise up to 18 visual elements in a second. They filter out most of the stimuli and



Excessive attempts to connect ideas (such as in this medical spa at the Estonia Hotel, where the light fittings take the shape of needles) can be 'too much' stimuli for customers.

will pay attention to only those that are somehow related to their existing knowledge—that is, one or more chunks of their memory.

Spas providing holistic, informational or spiritual services may also find it interesting to note that we can think six to seven times faster than we can talk (which means that most of the time we're talking to ourselves). This is why customers can switch off so easily during involved instructions or explanations, especially if the information (or the interpretation) is not relevant to their interests or previous experiences.

INTERIOR DESIGNERS GENERALLY design spas, rather than a team of experts and artists who understand what visitor psychology has to say about the spa experience. It needs to be stated here: interior design does not equal experience creation. Whereas interior design focuses on appearance and function, experience creation is a form of art that is rooted deeply in visitor psychology. Therefore, I recommend applying an experience mapping process as part of any development. However, it is also useful as a service enhancement exercise.

Experience mapping involves assessing information and clues regarding the following major issues:

- Way-finding/orientation—the ways in which customers find the spa (marketing, word of mouth, signage, etc.)
- Interpretation
- Customer flow (information provision, signs, colours, surfaces, etc.)
- Interpretation tools (written materials and visuals, user safety, length of stay at any stage of the visit, text readability, service protocols, atmosphere, waiting time management, web-based interpretation, etc.)
- Human resources (e.g. staff appearance, interpersonal capabilities)
- Monitoring (the ways in which experiences are monitored, both at customer and employee-end)
- Additional services (service provision, prices, packages, etc.)

I believe that spas have great potential as well as challenges in improving their guests' experiences. Sometimes small adjustments of the service procedures can make a huge difference. Sometimes new services or a whole new approach should be brought in.

One thing, however, is certain: If you don't pay special attention to the experience creation capacity of your spa, you're likely to be missing out on opportunities to benefit your guests and your bottom line. 🍃

The following **Experience Grid** is a useful tool for assessing the experience mapping process, providing indication of areas that need enhancement and improvement. The four key factors of the grid visually introduce how the spa performs from a visitor experience point of view:

- **How Beneficial:** how complex the benefit structure is (e.g. one or more of the following likely benefits—rejuvenation, learning, relaxation, social interaction).
- **How Accessible:** how do the customers find the facility itself (e.g. ambience, safety of wet areas, space, navigability).
- **How Valuable:** how much and how wide the associated value of the entire experience is (not individual services) (e.g. value for money, how personal the service was, how much was the customer 'involved' in the creation of the experience).
- **How Authentic:** was the experience 'local' or 'generic' (e.g. what elements had roots in local traditions or materials, did the service relate to the spa's theme).

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