

# spaissues

## defining THEspaASSOCIATION

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There was a time, not so long ago, when spa existed as its own entity. There were no conferences, spa associations, magazines and very few legislations. Over the past decade however, the fast growth of spa has propelled a need for structure to give our industry the credibility and integrity it deserves. From statistic gathering and eco-standards to safety issues, there's actually a lot of work put in behind the scenes by enthusiastic folk, many of whom work on a volunteer basis.

### SPAA. ISPA. BSWA. ISA. TSA.

There are spa associations in most countries these days if not more than one. ISA, the British International Spa Association, for example, was founded by a group of professionals within the beauty, spa and education fields, with the intention to "promote minimum standards of quality and service within the spa industry, and to improve and promote education for spa therapists." Probably most well known is The International Spa Association (ISPA) that has existed since 1991 and has more than three thousand members in 83 countries.

"The primary purpose of ISPA is to advance the spa industry by providing invaluable educational and networking opportunities, promoting the value of the spa experience and speaking as the authoritative voice to foster professionalism and growth," says Lynee McNees, President of ISPA. Likewise The Thai Spa Association has been very active in increasing wages, standards and training of those working inside the spa industry, their objective to "promote and preserve the general welfare of the spa industry and the safety of its consumers."

Mary Darling, the former executive member of BSWA and a member of the Green Spa Network, explains that the purpose of many spa associations is to provide a formal communication network within the region. This in turn enhances a more professional business environment. "Associations provide educational opportunities for all members of the community and provide a forum for private enterprise to influence government policies, whether tourism, health or manpower/labour."

The plus points are many. Carroll Dunham from the Nepal Spa Association agrees that benefits of spa associations are the working together to lobby the government, and parallel industries as one voice on issues that effect the industry to produce positive change. "Spa associations give us a chance to improve standards in countries, and unite to promote indigenous knowledge."

Says Darling, "The Green Spa Network, for instance, is creating a Green Spa Tool Kit that will give members resources and tools to improve their businesses, such as greening linens, laundry, lighting and natural skincare to name a few." She adds that the AP Coalition through the Profit Task Force utilised a USA based company to initiate the very first Asia industry salary survey in Bali as well as create a spa business presentation for local operators and suppliers.

Like many, Darling works on a volunteer or 'pro bono' basis. While all ISPA staff are paid employees, 99 percent of associations including BISA, exist as a non-profit association. ISA, for example, is entirely self-funding, and all members of the council are volunteers, giving their time and expertise free of charge.

Dunham explains that it can be hard sometimes for competitors in small markets to feel comfortable sharing and working together for common good. "However, this should grow with maturity in the industry. Spa associations can be monopolised by certain groups and not represent a healthy genuine cross-mix of players in country markets."

Darling adds that in most cases, spas and related businesses are eligible to join an association at a fairly reasonable pricing

structure yet there are some associations perceived as exclusive since the requirements may be out of reach in relation to the profile of the membership or operators vs suppliers.

According to Darling, many spa associations are not taken seriously by other associations, which can be very confusing for spa business owners. "Some spa associations lack a sense of 'business' to evolve the organisation into an influential or revenue producing effort that can cause new organisations to form due to 'internal falling outs' and dissolutions of relationships."

On a positive note McNees says that a spa association and member's needs are ever changing. "For example, right now it's the economy. So we're finding ourselves adjusting our game to make sure our members all succeed. Whether it's a corporate hotel spa with hundreds of employees, or a local day spa with a handful, we realise what works for one spa may not necessarily work for another and our goal is to ensure all spas have the tools necessary to flourish."

Indeed, it's comforting to know that there is a body of people organised to help you in times of need. So what of the future? "ISPA is really working on educating people that spas are about wellness and living a healthy and balanced life," says McNees. "For years, consumers have been telling us the number one reason they go to spas is to relax and reduce stress but we've allowed the media to lump spas into a luxury category. While we know that many spas offer luxurious treatments, the bigger picture is that spas are about wellness, about living your best life."

"The potential of spa associations' progress and achievement depends on the executive mission and focus," says Darling. "Professional training, management education and quality selection and recruiting in developing regions is top of the list in my mind and this is my personal focus with working with various associations. As the recently elected US President said, "this election has never been about me. It's been about you." 