

MIND, BODY AND TEETH

How Dental Spas Approach Patient Anxiety

By Kelsey Henke



Dental spas are a unique model of dental practice. In addition to general dentistry, dental spas often offer facial-esthetic procedures, retail wellness products and cosmetics, and spa services such as massage, chemical peels, paraffin wax hand treatments or microdermabrasion. Their waiting rooms often resemble upscale resorts and smell of lavender or fresh-cut flowers. They provide patients with calming teas, hot towels, pillows, champagne and eye masks. Foremost, they aim to offer dental care in an environment that allows the patient to feel relaxed and well cared for.

For some dentists, like Alex Naini, DDS, owner of Aesthetic Dental Spa, Vienna, Virginia, offering spa services was a natural extension of her background and personal philosophy of quality dental care. “I’m Persian,” she said. “It’s in the culture to greet everyone who walks in or ask if they want some tea. Everyone who walks in is a guest. We treat everyone like family.”

For others, providing spa services is a way to differentiate themselves from competitors. In an interview for Dental Performance Podcast, Susie Litkenhous, operations director of Auburn Dental Spa, Auburn, Alabama, explained how market oversaturation during the recession compelled her and her husband, Brad Litkenhous, DMD, to include spa amenities. “In the Auburn Opelika area, there’s a dentist on just about every corner in the area of this growing town,” said Litkenhous. “I was trying to think of a way to distinguish ourselves. And being one who does not really enjoy going to the dentist, I was constantly thinking of ways to reimagine what most people perceive of as going to the dentist.”

For Margaret Mitchell, owner of the Mitchell Dental Spa in Chicago, spa dentistry felt like a way to allow her practice to compete with an up-and-coming cosmetic services market that included non-dental providers. Office manager Jeff Doan says, “The real thing behind the increase in the number of dental spas was dentists getting into cosmetics. Dental spas were an outgrowth of med spas. In the med spa model, physicians offer cosmetic surgery and Botox; with the dental spa, the dentist offers cosmetic dentistry and Botox.”

How Dental Spas Benefit Patients with Dental Anxiety

While dental spas are often marketed to upscale consumers, they also appeal to a demographic that is motivated by something other than the want of a luxury experience. For the 30-40 million people in the United States who avoid going to the dentist each year due to fear, the nonthreatening environment and services dental spas offer can mean the difference between seeking and avoiding treatment.¹

“When people come into the office and they’re scared, I always tell them, ‘This is the place to come to if you’re scared. We’re very aware of your comfort,’” said Naini.

Dental anxiety has four primary triggers: visual stimuli, such as bright lights; auditory stimuli, such as drilling noises; olfactory stimuli, such as disinfectants; and sensation, such as vibration.² For owners of dental spas — who prioritize creating an atmosphere of relaxation — minimizing stressors that provoke dental anxiety is foundational to their business model.

Reduced Visual Triggers

The perceived sterility and impersonality of traditional health-care offices can contribute to a patient’s feelings of powerlessness and intimidation. In terms of reducing patient anxiety, dental spas have the advantage of looking visually distinct from traditional dentistry settings.

Dental spa owners carefully consider the organization, design and location of their space. Eschewing traditional healthcare office décor, they opt for warm or white wall colors, furniture with a residential or high-end feel, botanical accents, natural woods or tile, and calming imagery. The office of Park City Dental Spa, Park City, Utah, owned by James Abraham, DDS, features a plant wall and a water fountain as well as views of Park City Mountain. At the Mitchell Dental Spa, high-end residential decor and views of Lake Michigan offer a welcoming alternative to the sterile medical feel of many offices.



Park City Dental Spa Park City, Utah

Often, they model their interiors on the designs of actual spas. “I just kept saying when they were building my office, ‘I want it to look like a spa. I want it to feel like a spa,’” said Naini. “And, when I would go to dental meetings, I would check out the spas of the hotels I stayed at to get a feel for what they were like and apply that to my office.”

Dental spas are also conscious of their office’s lighting. Many feature ample amounts of natural light. They may use candles (real or flameless) in waiting areas as well as spa-specific areas. At Park City Dental Spa, dental assistants dim the lights while patients receive head and neck massages. At Bijou Dental Spa, Greenville, South Carolina, dental hygienists dim the lights while patients wait to be seen by the doctor. Owner Natasja Bevans, DMD, explains: “After my hygienist has done any probing and charting and X-rays, we give the patients five minutes to completely relax. We turn the lights down, lean them back and offer them a hot towel.”

Reduced Auditory Triggers

The noise of a dental drill is a major trigger for dental-phobic patients. This is something Bevans has seen firsthand. “For some people, the sound of the high-pitch drill will make them immediately tense up,” she said. In order to minimize her patient’s fears, Bevans selectively chose her tools. She uses a handpiece made by NSK Dental designed to reduce both noise and vibration. “I bought the quietest handpieces possible,” she said. “They’re electric, and they don’t whistle.”

Dental spas also aim to reduce ambient noise from other patients. Mitchell Dental Spa offers patients headphones and

televisions with cable access. Park City Dental Spa’s operatories are fully enclosed. At Aesthetic Dental Spa, Naini and staff only see one patient at a time. Aesthetic Dental Spa’s style of operation eliminates any potential for patients to absorb nearby auditory triggers, with the added benefit of allowing the dentist to give their full attention to the patient. “I see patients one at a time, so I can really focus on people. I try to make sure nobody feels rushed and everyone feels heard,” said Naini.

Some dental spas also play spa music. This type of music, characterized by soft, sustained sounds and subtle instrumentation, is designed to relax listeners.

Reduced Olfactory Triggers

Dental spas further help dental-phobic patients because they don’t smell like traditional dental offices. By using essential oils dispersed by diffusers or through the office’s HVAC system, dental spas introduce scents that not only mask potential olfactory triggers, but also activate regions of the brain that control a patient’s mood, sleep and health.

Dental spas use subdued essential oils in waiting areas so as not to agitate patients who may be sensitive to a particular smell. Aesthetic Dental Spa diffuses lavender essential oils. Park City Dental Spa uses therapeutic-grade essential oils in citrus and basil scents manufactured by dōTERRA.

Others integrate scents more directly into the patient experience through herbal neck wraps. At the Mitchell Dental Spa, patient massages include custom aromatherapy and herbal moisturizers. At Park City Dental Spa, patients can choose to have a spearmint

and eucalyptus mist sprayed on their dental bib. This particular essential oil combination is analgesic and has been shown to relax both muscles and the mind.³

Reduced Triggering Sensations

Dental spas are also extremely sensitive to the patient's tactile experience. Every detail, from the furniture to the spa services to the office's textiles, is carefully thought out.

One of the primary means dental spas utilize to promote calmness is heat. Many offer paraffin wax treatment, a process where patients submerge their hand in a basin of colorless, odorless heated wax. The wax acts a natural emollient, and the heat can help calm an anxious patient. Many also offer hot towels. "Having something warm on their neck really does calm people down," said Bevans. Aesthetic Dental Spa provides Biomats — mats that rely on infrared rays, negative ions and a combination of tourmaline and amethyst — to produce slight heat while the patient sits in the dental chair.

Dental spas also utilize a variety of stimulants and depressants to make patients feel at ease. Many offer a range of beverages, which usually includes a variety of teas and coffees. The Mitchell Dental Spa uniquely offers a champagne bar. At Aesthetic Dental Spa, Naini offers patients Alpha-Stim treatment, a cranial electrotherapy stimulation designed to reduce symptoms of anxiety. And many dental offices offer conscious sedation, nitrous oxide and topical anesthesia.

Spa services such as massages, warm and cold stone treatments, facials and hand treatments help patients relieve muscle tension. Many dental spas have traded paper napkins for cloth. Bijou Dental Spa purchased dental chairs from Forest Dental with a massage feature. "They have little air bladders. They don't move the patient or vibrate super heavy; they just gently distract," said Bevans.

Applications for General Dentists

For many general dentists, operating a dental spa is not a viable option. Fundamentally, dental spas operate according to a model different from most general dentistry practices. They often require staff with additional skillsets and relationships with vendors outside of traditional dental supply companies.

"You have to know how to run a spa business and a dental business," said Doan. As hiring manager of Mitchell Dental Spa, he must staff a full-time aesthetician and massage therapist and recognize competencies and licensure that are required of employees seeking both dental- and spa-related positions.

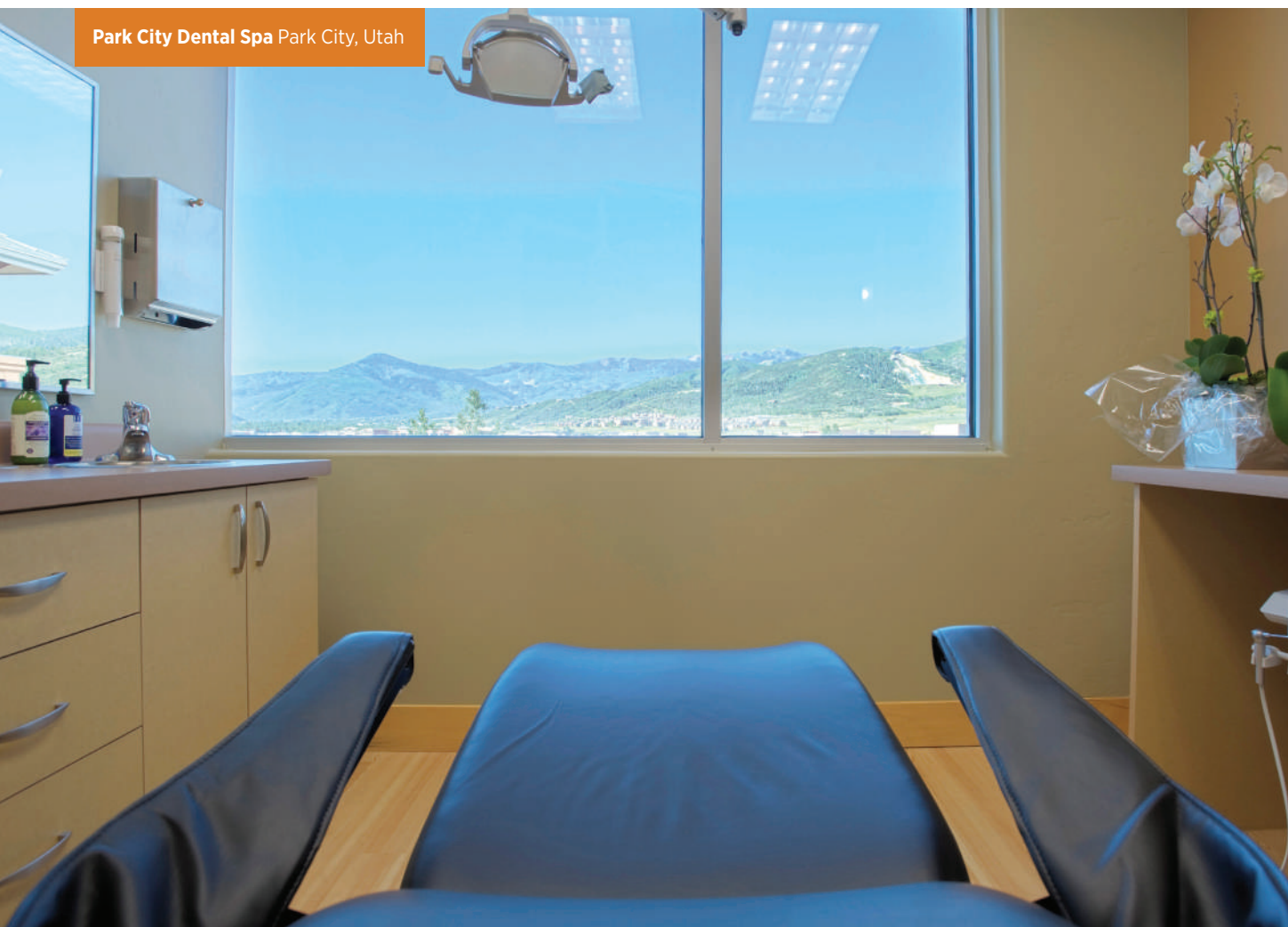
Dental spa operations can also bring unexpected costs — laundry services, pricey magazine subscriptions, HVAC fragrance diffusion maintenance, staff training, or additional marketing for communities that may not be familiar with the dental spa concept. Dental spas that sell custom products such as lip balms or lotions benefit from an extra revenue source but also must manage an added set of product design and retail responsibilities.

However, general dentists who would like to do more to help patients manage dental anxiety need not commit to a new business model to see effective change. As Doan explains, "People want to go to a dentist they like and a dental office they like. A dental spa is just one way to give that to them."

First and foremost, spa dentists recommend hiring competent and compassionate staff. "The biggest thing dental practices can focus on is friendly, outgoing, capable staff and doctors," said Doan.

A patient at Aesthetic Dental Spa, Vienna, Virginia, prepares for her visit with Alpha-Stim treatment, a warm blanket, neck pillow and paraffin wax treatment.





Naini agrees. “The personality of the staff and the doctor really make the difference,” she said. “Friendliness and a warm personality is really important to me when I hire a new team member.” After recruiting new hires, she personally walks her employees through the patient’s experience step-by-step so that they know how the patient will experience their care.

Spa dentists also suggest adding passive elements such as diffused essential oils and soothing sounds to the office. Park City Dental Spa dental hygienist Dawnetta Abraham suggests avoiding “elevator music,” which features jazzy rhythms that can be distracting or agitating. By making small changes to décor and lighting, dental offices short on time or money can create a more relaxed ambiance without too many additional expenses. A growing field of research into “healthcare customer experience” supports spa dentists’ recommendations. Recent articles suggest that, in addition to technical care and interpersonal interactions, the surrounding environment can have a significant impact on a patient’s emotional and cognitive states.^{4,5}

As dentists who treat patients with dental phobia know, anxiety can be an exhausting experience for patient and practitioner alike. Dental anxiety can lead to broken appointments, increases

in emergency care and oral disease progression.¹ Though dental spas may be a niche market, their practices are an important contribution to general dentistry’s repertoire of anxiety-reduction techniques. ♦

Kelsey Henke is associate editor of *AGD Impact*. To comment on this article, email impact@agd.org.

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