



WHITE PAPER

HYDROMASSAGE IN TODAY'S "NO-TOUCH" NORMAL: OPPORTUNITIES & BENEFITS OF HIGH-TECH, AUTOMATED MASSAGE POST-COVID

Automated massage can help spas overcome social distancing rules, decrease personnel costs and deliver the evidence-based wellness that today's consumers demand.

ABOUT THE GWI HYDROTHERMAL INITIATIVE

The GWI Hydrothermal Initiative was formed in 2010 to increase education and transparency around the design and implementation of thermal and wet areas. To this end, the Initiative has developed and published a key resource, the [Guide to Hydrothermal Spa & Wellness Development Standards](#), available for free download. In addition, the Initiative aims to educate therapists, specialists and users on the most beneficial ways to use these features to attain health and wellness. To learn more about the Global Wellness Institute's Hydrothermal Initiative, click [here](#).

Background: Covid-19 temporarily suspended spa visits worldwide. To enable reopening, governments have imposed strict social distancing and hygiene norms. Personnel/staffing represents a significant line item for every spa. Adequately trained staff are scarce, costly, and difficult to keep. Here, automated massage treatments and touchless wellness experiences can, therefore, support spa operators in delivering treatments.

Design/Methodology/Approach: This paper provides insights into the possibilities automated massage treatments offer spas in regard to social distancing and staffing flexibility. Expert interviews (see Table 1) were conducted to discern the most pressing problems and possible solutions.

Findings: Automated massage treatments support spa operators in overcoming social distancing rules as well as shortages of qualified staff, in addition they decrease operating costs while offering the results wellness consumers expect.

HIGH-TECH, AUTOMATED TREATMENTS

Covid-19 shutdowns have hit the spa industry hard and both short-term and medium-term forecasts warn that "normal" domestic and international travel will not bounce back quickly. Prior to the pandemic, spa operators around the globe were already finding it difficult to recruit and retain qualified staff, and, now, when spas are allowed to reopen, pressing issues will center around ensuring good hygiene and social distancing¹. There's no doubt that the work environment for massage therapists and estheticians will change dramatically – and their time will also be consumed with new disinfection procedures before and after treatments.

Previous pandemics, such as SARS in China in 2002/2003, show that travel ultimately returns to pre-pandemic volumes, but certain behaviors change. In addition to demanding increased hygiene, people typically begin to take personal responsibility by pro-actively changing their lifestyle choices in order to live longer and healthier lives. After the SARS epidemic in China, for example, people began exercising more, adopted healthier eating habits, and, in general, demanded more hygiene in public spaces².

In a post-COVID landscape, customers will value high hygiene standards combined with high-quality, effective, evidence-based services. Treatments involving touch (i.e. massage and facials) will certainly need to change. Research shows that creating lasting, positive impressions for guests depends on a few key factors: an attractive location, friendly and qualified staff, as well as an overall positive leisure/wellness experience³. Spas unable to meet those demands will be left behind.

Automated treatments requiring minimal hands-on touch are sought-after by both spa operators and their guests. In Europe, dry hydromassage systems are already popular in the medical sector for treating muscle pain – these devices comply to very strict legal requirements in order to be registered as “medical grade” and, importantly, their efficacy has to be proven via clinical studies, making this piece of equipment an ideal solution in the “new normal.” These devices should not be confused with the air-compression massage chairs offered in airports and shopping malls. They are, instead, products that have been used in the medical environment to treat issues like sciatica, chronic low back pain, pinched nerves, etc. for more than 25 years in Europe⁴.

Dry hydromassage systems (Figure 1) not only deliver high-quality hygienic treatments that are touchless and require minimal staff time, but they can also be customized for personalized wellness experiences. For example, guests can choose which body zones need more attention and can alter the pressure, speed and duration of the treatment. And these values can be combined and saved to form a specific individualized treatment that can be recalled from the library of programs. This way, spas can create their own massage journeys and/or personalized programs can be saved for frequent guests.



Figure 1: Dry Hydromassage Unit

Dry Hydromassage: Originally designed for medical use and follow the principles of classical hydro- and balneotherapy. Within the last two decades these units have become a standard means of treatment in rehabilitation and physiotherapy. In addition, during recent years they have become increasingly common in the wellness and spa sector.

How it Works: Customers are positioned on a comfortable cover made from natural rubber that is fitted on top of a tub filled with pleasantly heated water. Water nozzles placed below the cover along the customer's body are used for the application of a relaxing massage.

Operation: Modern units offer a large variety of treatment options, enabling a personalized massage experience for each customer. Treatment focuses can individually be set on a touchscreen as can the intensity of the massage. Crucially, cleaning and hygiene measures can be easily carried out.

“The use of dry hydromassage units is paramount when treating muscle tension. Studies have proven that they are effective for pain relief.”

- Detlef Kaleth, MD, specialist in orthopedics, Berlin in Igel Plus¹.

WHAT TO EXPECT POST-COVID-19?

Given that spa consumers tend to skew female and are often over 55 years old⁵, they are considered a high-risk group for Covid-19 and, therefore, need to take special precautions⁶. Therefore, they are naturally more concerned about social distancing than younger adults. According to the well-established Health Belief Model (HBM)⁷, people will automatically engage in risk reduction (i.e. social distancing) as long as they perceive a threat to be severe or as long as they believe that the benefits outweigh the risks⁸. Therefore, spa operators will be compelled to offer clients risk-free treatments that are unique, yet are perceived to be safe.

“What issues will spas need to overcome with new social distancing norms in order to deliver profitable, high-quality massage treatments?”

The five industry experts interviewed (see table 1) all agree that one of the most pressing issues for spa operators is the availability of well-trained staff. Industry experts anticipate this problem becoming more acute due to the pandemic and the pressure the new rules will put on individual therapists both in protecting their own well-being and that of their guests.

Since treatment areas are the responsibility of therapists, they will likely have less time to dedicate to clients when they are also tasked with sanitizing and disinfecting areas. And, of course, the new protocols and social distancing rules, means that more cleaners will be needed and visible in spa areas. In many cases, this means therapists may not be able to perform as many treatments in a shift as they were able to do previously, and, in addition, spas will likely be incurring additional costs for cleaners and cleaning supplies.

“Our starting situation, i.e. lack of qualified staff, will be amplified. We will end up with two distinct employee groups: trained therapists with high qualifications making a high hourly wage; and a larger number of less qualified staff that are making closer to minimum wage.”

(Consultant/Expert 2)

“All the experiences that have to do with touch and closeness now need to be enjoyed with caution. This can have a negative influence on staff as well as guests.” (Spa Operator/Expert 1)

Per *Forbes Travel Guide*, one solution will be an increased adoption of “high-tech touchless wellness experiences.”⁹

“High-grade devices that can be personalized, with a massage pressure that actually has a measurable effect on the central nervous system and comes very close to a manual massage would solve a lot of the ‘hands-off’ issues that our industry is grappling with.” (International Industry Expert/Expert 5)

"How can spa operators improve the appeal of their spa post-Covid-19?"

The industry experts agree that customers will want to see more hygiene in spas. As Expert 5 explained: *"I think you'll actually see people wanting to see the evidence of the cleaning during working hours."*

Also, people will be wary of being touched. Expert 4 (Spa Customer) stated: *"people are a bit more cautious with regard to physical contact"* which was reconfirmed by the spa operator (Expert 1) who worried: *"Then, of course...people are afraid of touching...and yet it will make a difference whether you can touch them with your bare hand or with gloves."*

All the experts agreed that people would most likely want to have back their old lives without any changes in behavior. However, due to new norms and regulations imposed to inhibit virus spread, this simply will not be possible in the near term. Spas will have to update and refine their existing spa menu, reducing treatments that demand touch (facials, massages) and turning to alternatives, such as automated massages, relaxation pods, inhalation therapy and hydrothermal bathing.

"How can spa operators adapt spa menus for massage treatments with high treatment quality and the anticipated staff shortages?"

Staff availability remains a pressing issue as Expert 2 explained: *"Bottlenecks due to staffing issues have dramatic consequences simply because they lead to loss of sales."*

In addition, loss of staff affects treatment quality. As Expert 1 explained: *"It would be wonderful if we had relatively similar massage techniques, but that hasn't caught on. Because every single therapist has his/her own style, has learned his/her own way of massaging and does not want to change."*

Thus, each time staff are lost, treatment style and quality can change. The majority of experts agreed, that automated massage therapies could be a solution for consistent, high-quality treatments with less touch that deliver the identical quality over and over again, using minimal staff and conforming to the strict Covid-19 rules on hygiene.

CONCLUSION

During the acute crisis phase of the pandemic where governments forced spas to close, operators have to prepare the reopening with offers that will bring clients back. This is often being done via deep discounts that will almost certainly eat into profits. Social distancing will also limit the number of guests that can be in a spa at any one time, while hygiene protocols will increase operating costs. To minimize the financial impact, operators need to be creative in their offerings and takes steps to reassure clients of a safe, hygienic and unique spa experience.

A spa menu can be segmented into "essential" and "unique" experiences. Where "essential experiences" are typically classified as pools, massages and facials. However, some of these mainstays of the spa will not be easily available or will be completely altered. An investment in medical-grade automated massage treatments will create new revenue opportunities for any spa.

As Expert 2/Spa Consultant noted: *"We need to market it to make it clear to the potential customers that this is a truly good substitution for a manual massage: 'You don't have to take your clothes off, you won't be touched, the whole thing is hygienic and still effective.'"*

Spa operators would be smart to embrace automated devices, especially as many have been medically proven to help patients suffering with muscle tension, fibromyalgia, neuralgia, disorders of the musculoskeletal system and joint-related disorders...as well as circulatory disorders and symptoms of fatigue¹⁰.

One thing is certain: Covid-19 is not the last pandemic spa operators will likely experience. The question is not *if* the next pandemic will come, it is *when* will it come? Since the occurrence of HIV, zoonotic diseases have caused severe disturbances worldwide. Those who are prepared the best, will suffer least.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Prof. Dr. Kerstin Bremser
Pforzheim University of Applied Sciences



Kerstin Bremser holds a Business Administration degree from Otto-Friedrich University, Bamberg, Germany and a PhD in Business Administration from St. Gallen University, Switzerland. She is a full-time professor at Pforzheim University of Applied Sciences since 2008 with a focus on international business in Spanish-speaking countries and conducts research on crisis management in the tourism industry. Bremser has published several articles in international scientific journals and her 2013 contribution on crisis management in the hospitality industry is included in the Annals of Tourism Research curated collection on tourism risk, crisis and disaster management.

METHODOLOGY

The author conducted expert interviews with five anonymous industry experts in the month of May 2020. Experts were carefully selected for broad knowledge of the topic and representing different viewpoints. The experts comprised different countries, age groups and professions. Since most spa customers are female, only a female spa customer was interviewed. A coded list of the interviewed persons is enclosed in Table 1.

Expert	Profession	Description
E1	Spa Operator	Operator of hot springs, spas, hotels and a rehabilitation clinics in 3 different German states.
E2	Consultant	Licensed beautician, massage therapist and chiroprapist, experienced spa manager, operates consulting company.
E3	Manufacturer	CMO of medium-sized spa equipment manufacturer.
E4	Spa Customer (over 55)	Female customer, regular spa goer
E5	International Industry Expert	Leading expert in design and implementation of hydrothermal spas and wellness facilities.

¹ Saxenburg, Siska Von (2020): Massages: «La distanciation sociale est à revoir dans les protocoles», 21.04.2020

² Dombey, Olivier (2003): The effects of SARS on the Chinese tourism industry. *Journal of Vacation Marketing* 10 (1), S. 4–10

³ Rodrigues, Helena; Brochado, Ana; Troilo, Michael (2019): Listening to the murmur of water. Essential satisfaction and dissatisfaction attributes of thermal and mineral spas. In: *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing* 1 (1), S. 1–13. DOI: 10.1080/10548408.2019.1633986.

⁴ Harter, W. H. / FPZ (2004): Studie: Prospektive, kontrolliert randomisierte Studie (einfach verblindet) zur unterschiedlichen Wirksamkeit verschiedener Massagetechniken am Beispiel des Medy Jet unter Anwendung funktioneller integrierter Rückenschmerztherapie nach dem FPZ Konzept. (<http://wulfram-harter.learnengine.de/index.php/9-f-w/28-prospektive-kontrolliert-randomisierte-einfach-verblindet-studie-zur-unterschiedlichen-wirksamkeit-verschiedener-massagetechniken-der-du-sensteuerung-in-der-trockenen-aufwassermassage-am-medyjet>)

⁵ Kurtuluşoğlu, Feride Bahar; Esiyok, Bulent (2016): Motivations and destination selection of mature international thalassotherapy tourists; Kitchen, Jane (2020): Spa Business 2019-2020 Handbook

⁶ N. N. (2020): Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2. Informationen und Hilfestellungen für Personen mit einem höheren Risiko für einen schweren COVID-19-Krankheitsverlauf. Robert Koch Institut (RKI) (ed).

https://www.rki.de/DE/Content/InfAZ/N/Neuartiges_Coronavirus/Risikogruppen.html

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Health_belief_model

⁸ Cahyanto, Ignatius; Wiblishauser, Michael; Pennington-Gray, Lori; Schroeder, Ashley (2016): The dynamics of travel avoidance. The case of Ebola in the U.S. In: *Tourism Management Perspectives* 20, S. 195–203. DOI: 10.1016/j.tmp.2016.09.004

⁹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestravelguide/2020/06/30/how-hotels-are-handling-wellness-right-now/#4e0c0ed12d79>

¹⁰ Harter, W. H. / FPZ (2004)