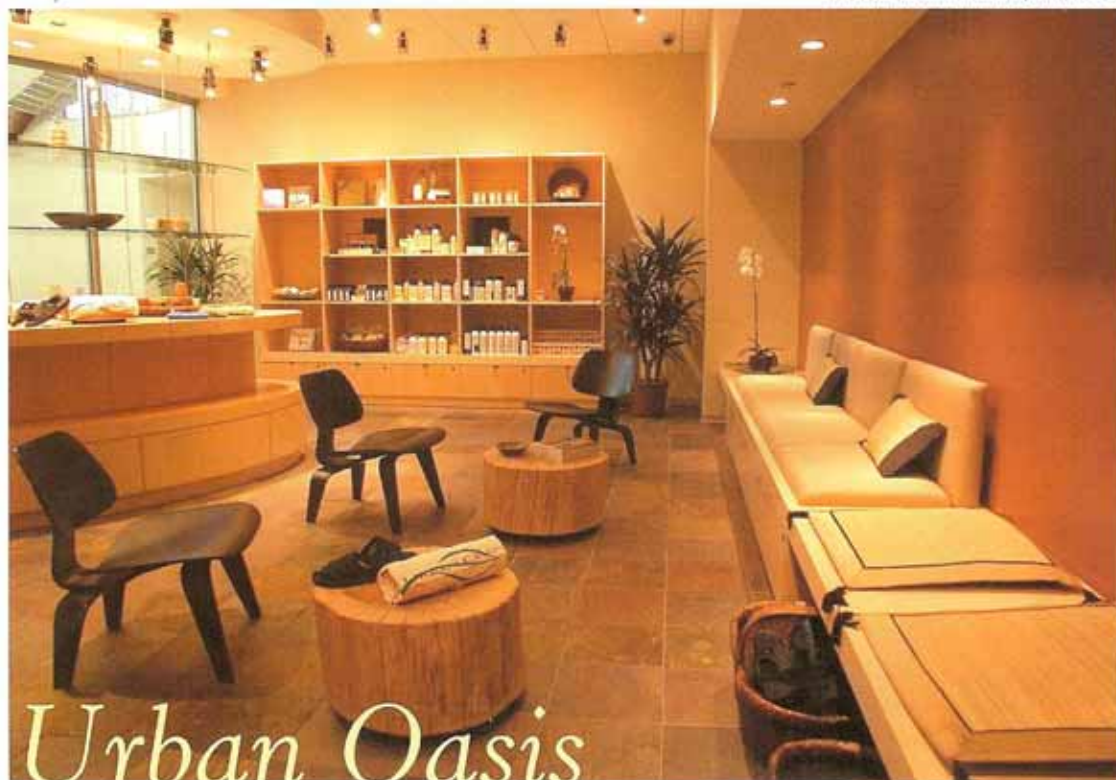


member profile

PHOTOS © NATHAN KIRKMAN/URBAN OASIS



Urban Oasis

At a young age, Peter Rubnitz was introduced to the therapeutic benefits of massage by his grandparents. Though he enjoyed the benefits of the treatment, he didn't initially see massage as part of his career path. Rubnitz is a numbers man, having earned a bachelor's degree in accounting and an MBA at Northwestern's Kellogg Graduate School of Management.

Following a successful career in accounting, Rubnitz decided to marry his business acumen with his respect for the art of massage. The result is Urban Oasis, a successful Chicago day spa that recently opened its second location in the Windy City.

BY SUSAN McDANIEL |

In an age of full-service, one-stop shops, Rubnitz goes about his spa business a little differently: Urban Oasis only offers massage services. "To my knowledge we're the only spa in the Chicagoland area that does massage therapy only," said Geoffrey Gross, who manages the original Urban Oasis location on Maple Street. "I think specialization has been the key to our success."

The spa's specialization has paid off by helping them create a strong brand in their service area and by attracting a diverse urban clientele. According to Gross, some 30 percent of their clientele is male, which he attributes to their massage-only philosophy. "Massage is a real personal experience," said Gross. "Our setting really enhances people's comfort level."

Being a spa that only offers massage also helps them fit in easily with neighboring spas that would otherwise be considered competitors. At their first location, there is another day spa just one floor up. Many of their clients go upstairs for other services, then head down to Urban Oasis for a massage. At the new Lincoln Park location, there is a full-service spa just across the street that, Gross said, recognized Urban Oasis as a draw and welcomed them into the neighborhood.

"I think specialization has been the key to our success."

Gross also said the single-minded focus lets their therapists work at becoming consistently better at one thing, rather than chasing the latest trends. "Trends come and go, and it was exhausting trying to keep up," said Gross. "Peter's philosophy is if you're going to specialize, every session needs to be really good."

In addition to concentrating on product quality, Rubnitz also emphasizes high quality customer service. Their booking process is designed to keep the spa's atmosphere soothing while taking care of a high volume of clients. Appointments are scheduled in 15-minute increments so only two or three people are checking in at one time. The slight variation in time keeps the environment tranquil for clients, and with fewer people in front of them, the staff can concentrate on customer service. "There's a lot of movement," Gross said, "but it's staggered in time so you don't get a lot of commotion. We have 10 treatment rooms and six personal showers, so we have mastered the choreography of client traffic flow."

Urban Oasis also offers accessible hours. The spa is open seven days a week, with long evening hours; they take their last appointment at 8 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Urban Oasis can also offer clients consistency in their therapy staff, thanks to a compensation package that boosts their staff retention rate. "Out of 75 therapists, one-fourth have been with us for five years or more," said Gross.

A sliding commission structure, created by Rubnitz, allows the spa's therapists to increase their base commission rate by increasing their request rate. Urban Oasis also offers health and dental benefits, paid vacation days and a 401K plan. Continuing education is reimbursed in proportion to the number of shifts worked. Therapists are considered full-time if they work four half-day shifts per week. And most therapists work at both locations, which helps them expand their client base. "People land here and build



a clientele in a way that is very challenging for a therapist out on their own," said Gross.

With the two spas just one mile from each other, going from one to the other is easy for the staff and, perhaps more importantly, the clients.

The initial idea to open a second location was simply to handle the overflow of the first. Before they opened a second spa, Urban Oasis had a list of other spas they would refer clients to when they couldn't fit them in. When clients were having to book two and three weeks out to get an appointment, Rubnitz realized he needed another location.

Because the majority of the spa's clientele is from the immediate neighborhood or the two adjoining zip codes, it made sense to open the second in the same area. Based on booking numbers, their customers seem to have made the transition easily.

Having just celebrated their first anniversary at the new location, Gross says their biggest challenge is coordinating staffing: "Trying to match staffing with demand for services without being overstaffed or understaffed. Trying to find that sweet spot."

How have they handled it? Again, Rubnitz' background has come in handy. As an economist, Rubnitz is, according to Gross, "kind of a nut for numbers – in a good way." Through the years, he has created tracking devices for virtually every

Vital Statistics

Urban Oasis

First spa opened: December 1992;
second: August 2003

Square footage: 5,400 square feet (original location on Maple Street); 5,800 square feet (new location on North Avenue)

Guest ratio: 70% female; 30% male

Number of treatment rooms: 10 at each location

Number of employees: 75 therapists, 13 administrative, 12 housekeeping, 3 management

Method of staff payment/compensation: Therapists receive base + sliding commission + benefits

Product line(s) used: Archipelago Botanicals

Contact information:

939 W North Ave
Chicago, IL 60622
1.312.640.0001
www.urban oasis.biz

aspect of the business. They are now using those numbers to project staffing needs and plan future growth. After just one year, eight of the new location's 10 treatment rooms are being used at peak times.

With a strong night business at both locations, Gross said their most recent marketing efforts have been to fill day slots. "It's been a tough nut to crack," he said, "but we're seeing returns."

Word-of-mouth is the spa's biggest business-builder, and their most successful advertising channel is participating in direct mail. They are also seeing good returns on their newest marketing program – discount coupons on their Web site and others.

Gross says the spa's success, though, is a tribute to Rubnitz' business plan and personal qualities. "Peter has a big heart and good instincts." While his educational background may not have predicted Rubnitz' segue into the spa industry, now that he's here, it appears to be a perfect fit. ■

SUSAN MCDANIEL, owner of Kline-McDaniel Writing/Editing, is a freelance writer in Lexington, Ky.

Gross also said the single-minded focus lets their therapists work at becoming consistently better at one thing, rather than chasing the latest trends. "Trends come and go, and it was exhausting trying to keep up," said Gross. "Peter's philosophy is if you're going to specialize, every session needs to be really good."

In addition to concentrating on product quality, Rubnitz also emphasizes high quality customer service. Their booking process is designed to keep the spa's atmosphere soothing while taking care of a high volume of clients. Appointments are scheduled in 15-minute increments so only two or three people are checking in at one time. The slight variation in time keeps the environment tranquil for clients, and with fewer people in front of them, the staff can concentrate on customer service. "There's a lot of movement," Gross said, "but it's staggered in time so you don't get a lot of commotion. We have 10 treatment rooms and six personal showers, so we have mastered the choreography of client traffic flow."

Urban Oasis also offers accessible hours. The spa is open seven days a week, with long evening hours; they take their last appointment at 8 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Urban Oasis can also offer clients consistency in their therapy staff, thanks to a compensation package that boosts their staff retention rate. "Out of 75 therapists, one-fourth have been with us for five years or more," said Gross.

A sliding commission structure, created by Rubnitz, allows the spa's therapists to increase their base commission rate by increasing their request rate. Urban Oasis also offers health and dental benefits, paid vacation days and a 401K plan. Continuing education is reimbursed in proportion to the number of shifts worked. Therapists are considered full-time if they work four half-day shifts per week. And most therapists work at both locations, which helps them expand their client base. "People land here and build



a clientele in a way that is very challenging for a therapist out on their own," said Gross.

With the two spas just one mile from each other, going from one to the other is easy for the staff and, perhaps more importantly, the clients.

The initial idea to open a second location was simply to handle the overflow of the first. Before they opened a second spa, Urban Oasis had a list of other spas they would refer clients to when they couldn't fit them in. When clients were having to book two and three weeks out to get an appointment, Rubnitz realized he needed another location.

Because the majority of the spa's clientele is from the immediate neighborhood or the two adjoining zip codes, it made sense to open the second in the same area. Based on booking numbers, their customers seem to have made the transition easily.

Having just celebrated their first anniversary at the new location, Gross says their biggest challenge is coordinating staffing: "Trying to match staffing with demand for services without being overstaffed or understaffed. Trying to find that sweet spot."

How have they handled it? Again, Rubnitz' background has come in handy. As an economist, Rubnitz is, according to Gross, "kind of a nut for numbers – in a good way." Through the years, he has created tracking devices for virtually every

Vital Statistics

Urban Oasis

First spa opened: December 1992;
second: August 2003

Square footage: 5,400 square feet (original location on Maple Street); 5,800 square feet (new location on North Avenue)

Guest ratio: 70% female; 30% male

Number of treatment rooms: 10 at each location

Number of employees: 75 therapists, 13 administrative, 12 housekeeping, 3 management

Method of staff payment/compensation: Therapists receive base + sliding commission + benefits

Product line(s) used: Archipelago Botanicals

Contact information:

939 W North Ave
Chicago, IL 60622
1.312.640.0001
www.urban oasis.biz

aspect of the business. They are now using those numbers to project staffing needs and plan future growth. After just one year, eight of the new location's 10 treatment rooms are being used at peak times.

With a strong night business at both locations, Gross said their most recent marketing efforts have been to fill day slots. "It's been a tough nut to crack," he said, "but we're seeing returns."

Word-of-mouth is the spa's biggest business-builder, and their most successful advertising channel is participating in direct mail. They are also seeing good returns on their newest marketing program – discount coupons on their Web site and others.

Gross says the spa's success, though, is a tribute to Rubnitz' business plan and personal qualities. "Peter has a big heart and good instincts." While his educational background may not have predicted Rubnitz' segue into the spa industry, now that he's here, it appears to be a perfect fit. ■

SUSAN MCDANIEL, owner of Kline-McDaniel Writing/Editing, is a freelance writer in Lexington, Ky.