

Massage Franchises Offer Opportunities

An interview with Gigi Harding, CEO,
Hand and Stone Massage Spa

The landscape is changing in the United States, and now in Canada, as more therapists are choosing employee-ship over sole practitioner or contractor status. Opportunities for employment exist in large, commercial, high-profile, well-trafficked massage franchises with marketing campaigns and accounting systems well established. Therapists without the resources or skills to build their own businesses are finding massage franchises a welcome alternative, and in many cases far more lucrative than trying to operate one's own business.

Franchises offer service availability seven days a week, strong promotional campaigns and typically lower fees for service than many massage offices. However these new concepts have some therapists worried. Critics wonder if lower pricing is good for the profession and how this translates to what a practitioner within a franchise is paid – others lament that franchises produce a cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all commoditized fast food product.

I caught up with Gigi Harding, CEO of Hand and Stone Massage Spa, at the franchise's Canadian flagship, located in an upscale shopping centre at the corner of Bathurst and Centre streets in Thornhill, Ont. I had some candid questions for her about her company's intentions in the massage industry.

Gigi and Brett Harding own more than 70 Kwik Kopy Franchises throughout Canada. The sister-brother team were looking for opportunities in another industry when they discovered the New Jersey-based Hand and Stone Spa Massage franchise, founded in 2004 by John Marco. "We saw a definite need for affordable massage services throughout Canada and Hand and Stone was positioned to offer just that in a big way," notes Gigi Harding.

I asked Harding what the advantages are to a massage therapist working in a massage franchise. She described the benefits of higher income potential, support staff and a fun environment. "We want everyone who's associated with our organization to feel like our guests – clients and staff – our goal is to produce 'a guest atmosphere.'"

The facility is clean, organized, friendly and warm. Front desk staff assist with room changeover – replacing the signa-



ture service hot stones and linens with fresh ones – to ensure each guest can be cared for promptly. It's also the staff's job to formally introduce guests to their therapist, further establishing a high-quality, service-focused atmosphere.

The Hardings organize team events to build spirit and collegiality and they're constantly surveying how to make the environment better for the therapists. For example, each of the eight spa rooms is outfitted with an electric table, sink and everything the therapist needs to perform the treatment without running all over the clinic to find something needed.

To further customize service, comment cards are given to every client. These cards are used to ensure clients match well with therapists. provides training sessions to all therapists in topics of customer service, face and foot massage



(Left to right) Joyce Frustaglio, Alan Shefman, Gigi Harding, Linda Jackson and Brett Harding celebrate the gala opening of Hand & Stone on Sept. 24, 2009.



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protocols, and the hot stone massage protocol. Therapists are oriented to the business and technique practices early on to ensure their personal and organizational success.

When asked about wages, Harding described one interview with a practitioner who was working in four different offices. "Why are you driving to all these places," she encouraged, "when you could just work here and make more money?" The Hardings apply a strong marketing model and note that 50 per cent of clients are same-day walk-ins. "If you want to work, we can fill up your appointment book quickly," Gigi points out.

Therapists earn income through providing care, retaining clients (membership sales), up-selling to the face or foot massage services, and in holding lead therapist/management positions, "If you give us five days a week at five sessions a day," Harding explains, "you can earn between \$40 and \$45,000 per year."

Harding states there is tremendous opportunity for massage therapists if you can "get your head around this model," pointing to the challenges in convincing therapists to give employment in a franchise a try.

She points out that with Hand and Stone, the therapists can focus on what they do best – providing client care. In addition, the therapists have access to effective computer systems for recording treatment notes, while the manager takes care of monitoring operations for them.

Hand and Stone is a membership-based business. A client doesn't have to be a member to receive spa therapy, but members save money via

preferential rates. Better rates are granted to members for additional massage sessions within the month. For the therapist, it means guaranteed repeat customers.

There are currently 30 Hand and Stone locations in the United States, and the Thornhill, Ont., location is the first of a planned 100 locations in Canada.

Harding described franchises as a new wave – a shift in the massage industry where there will be an

increased demand for good therapists. Each individual franchise location will require about 20 therapists: "We will drive the need for good therapists." There are opportunities too for massage therapists as managers or even franchise investors. To find out more, contact the Hardings at www.handandstone.ca.

Don Dillon, RMT, is a therapist, writer and national speaker. Contact him through his website at www.MTCoach.com.

Coming Events

Massage Therapy Association of Alberta Seminars

JANUARY 3-31, 2010
Calgary, Alta.
Organization: MTA
www.mtaalberta.com/?page=119

Massage Awareness Day

JANUARY 27 and
FEBRUARY 18, 2010
Olympia, Wash.
Location: Legislative Building
Organization: AMTA
www.amta-wa.org/index.php?src=events&submenu=Calendar&srctype=detail&category=Meetings&refno=76

Clinical STM Stretching Seminar

FEBRUARY 27-28, 2009
Inverness, Fla.
Location: 1201 W Main St.
www.massagesmart.com

Highlighting Massage Therapy in CIM Research

MAY 13-15, 2010
Seattle, Wash.
Organization: Massage Therapy Foundation
www.massagetherapyfoundation.org

2010 World Massage Festival & Massage Therapy Hall of Fame

JUNE 17-21, 2010
Lexington, Ky.
Location: Berea College
www.worldmassagefestival.com

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