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Spa Lady- She Delivers

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For most entrepreneurs, the motivation for starting a business comes from a particularly inspired invention, the perception of an undiscovered niche in the marketplace or even a severance check.

For Randi Ragan, it was the L.A. traffic.

She was driving--idling and lurching, actually--to her home in Silver Lake, having just received a facial at a spa near the Beverly Center, when it came to her.

"I had to drive 45 minutes to try out this new facility and by the time I got home the whole experience was negated by traffic," Ragan said. The psychological lift from the facial may have been wasted, but the seed of an idea was planted.

"I wasn't a spa junkie because I couldn't afford to spend a week here or a week there, but I'd been around enough to see what was out there and see how fast the industry was growing," she said.

So with \$50,000 of her own savings, a focus on marketing materials and an eco-friendly approach, a first-rate Web site and the conviction that other women would love to have their facials come to them, Ragan gave birth to Green Bliss Eco Spa. Other than a home office and product storage area in Silver Lake, Ragan took the rest of the business exclusively mobile.

With 25 independent contractors who provide in-home spa parties, Green Bliss offers a variety of spa treatments, organic appetizers and champagne, private yoga instruction, gift bags and a selection of fair-trade crafts from developing countries. Prices range from \$85 to \$250 per person, and she'll do it for as few as four people at a party.

"People have sought me out," she said. "It's been incredible, especially in the event arena. More and more people want to add spa services to compliment a party or fundraiser."



Green Bliss Eco Spa brings massages, facials, and pedicures to womens' homes

Although she's toured hundreds of spas as part of yoga retreats as an instructor, Ragan had never run a spa, or even a business.

"Since I didn't have that background, my biggest challenge has been my balance sheets," she said. Since she opened last summer, she's done more than \$300,000 in sales and that figure is growing. Ragan expects to be in the black this summer.

Amy Walia-Fazio recently hired Ragan to pamper her and 10 of her closest friends at her home on her 30th birthday. Ragan brought three technicians, stayed more than three hours and presented each guest with a gift bag. Walia-Fazio spent about \$85 per person.

"One of the things I really liked was that they're a holistic spa and they're really conscientious about the products they use," said Walia-Fazio, who interviewed several mobile spa owners before booking Ragan.

"You get the best and most conscientious care from Randi," she said. "I didn't feel like I was just one more event."

The \$10 billion spa industry grew 18 percent from 2003 to 2005, according to Lynne Walker McNees, president of the International Spa Association. Her organization's research has shown that 8 percent of spa goers are motivated by the desire to make a social connection.

"Mobile spas are a perfect example of that," she said. "You can get your girlfriends together and get manicures and pedicures."

Mobile spas are growing particularly fast in Los Angeles, where traffic is a problem, individuals put a premium on time and there is a willingness to try the new and trendy.

Eco-conscious

While there are about 20 mobile spas in the L.A. area, only a couple of them are environmentally focused.

"When I started in 2000, it was just myself and a couple of other people; I embraced the competition," said Diana Hodgson, owner of Serve the Goddess Mobile Spa, a rival of Ragan's. "But in the last few years it's gotten really competitive."

Hodgson, who uses her own organic product line for treatments, said she hopes the segment doesn't grow anymore. "It's tough enough as it is," she said.

And as one of the only green mobile spa businesses in town, Ragan knows that she's in the sweet spot of what's hot in L.A.'s spa world.

Ragan got interested in organic hygiene products after her daughter was born six years ago. She didn't want to use the chemicals present in most bath soaps on her baby, but she was surprised at the dearth of products available.

These days, she prides herself on offering not just organic products, but luxury spa quality products, beyond what shoppers might find on the shelves of Whole Foods Stores Inc. She also wants to sell products that clients can't find other places.

"I chose only products that are used only in one or two hotel spas," she said.

Ragan's next project is adding franchises along the West Coast. Several mobile spa companies are already franchised, but hers would be the first to use only organic products. She's developing the contracts right now.

Ragan said her ultimate goal is to build a headquarters that is a LEED-certified location, but the cost involved puts it several years away.

Some cynics point out that sending her operatives out onto the freeways isn't exactly being eco-friendly, and Ragan acknowledges there's some truth in that.

"I encourage them to carpool, though," she said

Green Bliss Eco Spa

Founded: July 2006

Core Business: Mobile spa parties

Employees in 2006: 1

Employees in 2007: 1, plus 25 independent contractors

Goal: To establish mobile spa franchises in major cities along the West Coast

Driving Force: To capitalize on women's desire to make a social event of the spa experience.