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Massage firms to aid aching area economy

Therapy a growth industry amid slump

By Mark Glover

The massage therapy industry is helping provide a healing touch to the area's ailing economy.

Consider that Scottsdale, Ariz.-based Massage Envy, which had zero local presence six years ago, now has 17 outlets with about 20,000 members in the Sacramento region. A typical outlet employs 25 to 30. Next month, the Emeryville-based National Holistic Institute will welcome the first classes at its new Sacramento campus at 1610 Arden Way. NHI, California's largest massage therapy school with six campuses, expects 100 students this year and 150 by early 2012.

Therapists receiving certification will enter a profession that the U.S. Department of Labor expects will see double-digit percentage growth between now and 2018.

"It has been a growing industry even during the recession," said Tim Veitzer, NHI's president. "... Our job-placement rates are the highest they've ever been."

NHI's core training program involves 720 hours, well beyond the statewide certification minimum of 500. Science and clinical experience classes are part of the curriculum. Students will be trained in various massage modalities, including Swedish, Shiatsu, deep tissue and myofascial therapy.

Graduates can expect to move on to work in spas, clinics, chiropractic offices and perhaps their own private practices. To further help those planning to go it on their own, the Sacramento NHI school will offer business classes.

"That's important for graduates who want to pursue their own business," Veitzer said. "We try to teach them everything from websites to bookkeeping to working the front desk. ... Really, there's never been a better time to become a massage therapist," Veitzer said.

Steve Pearce, a partner in a group overseeing five local Massage Envy franchise outlets, agrees. "I'll tell you how things are. If the (NHI Sacramento school) had

20 or 30 massage therapists ready to graduate, I'd hire them all right now," Pearce said. Pearce said customer traffic at area outlets has been brisk.

During the holiday shopping rush in December, area Massage Envy clinics and spas sold 7,000 gift cards. Last month, area outlets provided 25,000 massages. Pearce believes business is being driven by multiple factors, including a major shift in public perceptions over the past decade. Massage, Pearce said, was long stereotyped as either a veiled sexual favor or "an expensive luxury for the rich."

He claims that Massage Envy – which bills itself as the nation's leading provider of therapeutic massage, with 663 outlets and about 1 million members – started

affordable. From there, advertising, marketing and education helped get the word out." Pearce said Massage Envy also instituted evening and weekend hours, drawing customers who previously could not get away from work to even try a spa.

Most important, Pearce said, Massage Envy stressed the health benefits of therapeutic massage. Indeed, a form handed out to new customers resembles that handed out at a physician's office, filled with questions about health history and current complaints. On the back of the form, anatomy sketches help massage therapists zero in on areas of concentration for every visit.

"We're not a substitute for a physician, but many of our members say coming here is much more positive



Tim Veitzer, president of the National Holistic Institute, looks over the interior of NHI's new school on Arden Way opening next month. "It has been a growing industry even during the recession," said Veitzer of massage therapy. "Our job-placement rates are the highest they've ever been."

MASSAGE THERAPY AT A GLANCE

The industry: Estimated at up to \$17 billion in annual revenue, employing about 300,000 nationwide. Industry wide, revenue nearly doubled from 2005 to 2010.

Growth track: The U.S. Department of Labor has forecast 19 percent growth in the number of massage therapists from 2008 to 2018, topping all occupations.

The workers: The Evanston, Ill.-based American Massage Therapy Association says the nation's massage therapists are predominantly female (87 percent), working an average 15 hours a week solely on massage, charging an average of \$60 an hour and earning an average wage of \$41 an hour, including tips. A typical certified massage therapist sees 44 clients a month.

Education: There are more than 300 accredited massage schools and programs in the United States. The Emeryville-based National Holistic Institute is scheduled to begin classes in mid-March at NHI's newest campus – 1610 Arden Way, Suite 110, in Sacramento. More information: (800) 315-3552 or www.nhi.edu.

What's the rub? Eighty-eight percent of the nation's massage therapists provide Swedish massage, followed by 84 percent administering deep-tissue massage, 55 percent trigger point and 53 percent sports massage.

Customer base: According to a 2010 AMTA survey, 18 percent of adult Americans received at least one massage between July 2009 and July 2010, and an average of 28 percent of adult Americans received a massage in the previous five years.

Medical connection: In 2010, AMTA said nearly 40 million American adults had discussed massage therapy with their doctors or health care providers. Among that group, 31 percent were strongly recommended for massage therapy.

Company snapshot: Scottsdale, Ariz.-based Massage Envy bills itself as the leading provider of therapeutic massage in the United States, with 663 outlets and about 1 million members. It has 17 outlets in the Sacramento region, with about 20,000 members.

American Massage Therapy Assoc., Massage Envy, Bee research

changing perceptions after its founding in 2002.

"When we started, we offered a massage (for which) people were paying up to \$100 for \$39," he said. "Even now, our monthly membership is \$59 ... So, it was

and less expensive than the typical experience of going to the doctor," Pearce said.

He added: "Just a few years ago, this was completely untapped. We hope to heal people in mass. I'm talking about teachers, nurses and other people who are on their feet all day helping other people."

To that end, Pearce said exhaustive attention has been paid to small details designed to foster a relaxed, stress-defeating atmosphere.

At the Massage Envy spa in Loehmann's Plaza on Fair Oaks Boulevard, the sound of gently running water fills a darkened waiting area. Tea is available.

A dozen therapy rooms include massage tables that can be raised or lowered by hydraulic device to accom-



Could massages help heal the area economy?

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