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 class 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.

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 charging 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 accommodate all sizes, and physical handicaps. Tables can be heated for comfort. Music is available, as are full facial treatments.

Some therapy rooms have two massage tables, in case couples -- or, say, a customer and caregiver -- are more comfortable receiving treatments simultaneously. A full line of skin-care products also is sold on-site.

Massage Envy's competition includes motels, resorts, health centers and other spas; operators that also offer therapeutic massage services. San Antonio-based Massage Heights is a franchise competitor with a Roseville outlet, but it reportedly is making a push to open more than a dozen outlets in the region over the next four years.

Even with growth projections, the massage therapy industry is not immune from economic impacts. The Emeryville, Ill.-based American Massage Therapy Association reports that about 48 million Americans had at least one massage between July 2009 and July 2010, but that was down four percentage points from 2008-09. AMTA said most of that decline was among men, and it blamed the recession in part.

"We believe that as the economic climate improves, men will return to massage therapy as part of their regular health-maintenance plan," said Kathleen Miller-Read, AMTA president.

Miller-Read also noted that, ironically, the downtown economy also has helped the industry: "Stress, among other factors, is a popular reason why people get massage...AMTA is pleased that people are increasingly turning to massage for stress relief."