



"Why We Suggest You 'Unchain' Your Massage Experience..."

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The following article is the eighth installment of our "Knead Some Answers?" series. You can read other installments of "Knead Some Answers?" by visiting the "Newsletters" page of our website, www.tigerlilystudios.com.

Q: I keep seeing several different massage chains popping up all over town. I've been tempted by their rates, which appear to be significantly lower than those of most private practitioners. Why would I want to pay a higher price to see a private practitioner when I can pay less at one of these chains?

A: Throughout our massage therapy careers, we have worked in various settings, including day spas, destination resort spas, health clubs, and clinics (both corporate environments and locally-owned businesses). We have worked as independent contractors, employees, and self-employed private practitioners. We have had the advantage of experiencing, first hand, the advantages and pitfalls of each of these environments and arrangements.

Ultimately, we feel that we are able to provide our clients with the best, most customized, and most effective therapy as private practitioners. As solo practitioners, we have devised our own service menu that best utilizes our own unique training and skills. Since we are able to create our own schedule, we are able to devote more time to each client and provide more attentive and personalized service.

As a massage therapy client, reliable, quality service is important to you. You understand that it isn't really a "bargain" if you go to a massage chain and are matched with a therapist with whom you don't connect, and whose technique, style, or personality doesn't match your needs. And it really isn't a "deal" if you experience a disappointing massage session. There are most certainly some fantastic Massage Therapists working in these chains (and in all types of massage establishments, for that matter). When you find a therapist who is "a good fit" for you, we encourage you to support that therapist by continuing to see him or her (regardless of where he or she works).

Massage chains are selling a very personal - and personalized - service. They are selling the skills, techniques, styles, personalities, and nuanced characteristics of individuals. The point here is that massages are not widgets. One size certainly does not fit all, and massage is just about the least "generic" service that one can purchase. No one is eager to spend their hard earned money on a massage that is not tailored to their needs and that they may not thoroughly enjoy.

The prices at many of these massage chains seem like quite a bargain at first glance, however, many of them encourage (often not so subtly) that clients tip their therapists 15 - 20%. This is because the therapists are usually only receiving a small fraction of the price of the services that they provide, and the company - as well as the therapists - are relying on clients' generosity to make up for this fact. When recruiting massage therapists, these chains often include therapists' "expected tips" in the hourly wages that they advertise. As the restaurant industry has done previously, the spa industry has attempted to condition patrons to tip in order to make up for the fact that the staff is being paid a relatively low hourly wage.

Generally speaking, massage therapists in private practice set their fees at a rate that they feel to be fair. A solo practitioner has the freedom to charge what he or she feels to be an appropriate price for his or her skills. If that solo practitioner receives a tip, then he or she can truly consider that tip to be "the cherry on top," and not the necessary stop gap to bring his or her hourly wage up to a livable level.

Because of the fact that their therapists may not be compensated adequately, many spas and other massage establishments are plagued by a high turnover rate. This, of course, can be frustrating for clients who would like to continue seeing the same therapist time after time. Calling a spa to make an appointment with your favorite therapist only to find that he or she no longer works there can be extremely disappointing. As we're fond of saying, "The only turnover you'll find in our clinic is the one we ask you to do halfway through your massage."

Additionally, many of these chains offer an inexpensive introductory massage, but require clients to purchase memberships (with monthly membership fees) if they choose to return. Many clients find these membership arrangements to be restrictive and difficult to cancel. We think that you'll find that our packages offer an hourly rate that is comparable to, if not less than, that of many chains, and we're confident that you'll find our packages to be tremendously more flexible than these chains' membership plans.

Furthermore, according to the Austin Independent Business Alliance, shifting just ten percent of your shopping from chain stores to locally owned businesses annually:

- Adds \$244 million to our local economy
- Creates 2,855 new jobs
- Supports a sustainable local economy for us all

The AIBA goes on to explain that for every \$100 in customer spending at a national chain, the total local economic impact is only \$13. The same amount spent with a local merchant yields \$45 - more than three times the local economic impact!

The franchise-based "Massage Envy, LLC," for example, is based in Scottsdale, Arizona, and is owned by a New York, New York-based conglomerate called Sentinel Capital.

Sentinel Capital has invested in several franchise and multi-unit businesses, including Border Foods, a leading franchisee in the Taco Bell system; Castle Dental, a leading dental clinic operator in the Sunbelt; Cottman Transmission Systems, the nation's second-largest franchisor of transmission repair depots; Falcon Holdings, one of the largest franchisees of Church's Chicken restaurants; Interim Healthcare, the nation's largest provider and franchisor of home healthcare services; Metro Dentalcare, a leading dental clinic practice operator in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area; and Southern California Pizza Company, a 224-unit Pizza Hut franchisee operating in the greater Los Angeles market.

There are certainly great Massage Therapists working at Massage Envy locations all over the country (some of whom we know and respect very much). Ultimately, however, we believe that an organization such as this has minimal ties to or investment in our local Austin community, and our opinion is that it really doesn't make sense to turn to a conglomerate that pedals tacos, dental care, transmissions, fried chicken, home health care, and pizza for your massage therapy needs.

All that being said, would we encourage you to visit a massage chain over foregoing a massage altogether? Absolutely. Generally speaking, receiving massage anywhere is preferable to not receiving massage at all. (But similarly, even though eating anything is preferable to eating nothing at all, optimizing our diet requires evaluating the quality,

source, and community & environmental impact of that food). And, as we mentioned previously, if you find a therapist with whom you connect, we encourage you to support him or her no matter where he or she may work.

Obviously, since we are private practitioners, it's no surprise that we favor visiting a solo practitioner over a chain establishment. However, we do honestly feel that, generally speaking, visiting a private practitioner helps you ensure that you will receive the most reliable service, the most customized care, and the best value for your money while making a real and positive impact on your local community.

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