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A Tag-Team Duo

San Franciscan couple Howard Hines and Maria Tan take a very hands-on approach to managing their salon, Tiptoes Nail Spa, despite juggling another full-time job and two kids.

by Thi Dao

The reviews of Tiptoes Nail Spa on yelp.com rave about skilled nail techs, beautiful decor, a relaxing ambiance, and attentive salon owner Howard Hines, who always greets clients with a beverage. Located in San Francisco, Tiptoes is owned and run by Hines and wife Maria Tan. With 1- and 4-year-old children and Hines holding on to his day job, the two manage a crazy schedule that ensures at least one of them is in the salon when it's open. That means Tan drops off the kids at day care by 9 a.m., rushes to open the salon, is there until Hines arrives at 4 p.m., when she gets relieved to pick up the kids and attend to errands. Most of the time, both Hines and Tan are there weekends as well.

Natural Services

The two researched salons in the city before choosing their design. "Maria took me to get my nails done in probably 10 different nail spas across the Bay Area. We just looked to see what other people were doing, and what we liked about their spas and what we didn't like," says Hines.

What they've settled on is Asian-inspired decor with light green walls and custom-made black pedicure thrones with unique pedi bowls. Finding the little comforts lacking when they visited other salons, they included a flat-screen TV to show movies during services. Manicures are given at the pedicure chairs for maximum client comfort.

Their retail area contains all the products used in the services so clients can use the products at home. Other items include jewelry and bags from Southeast Asia, a skin care line, and facial products.

Tan came up with the salon menu. Considering her pregnancy when the salon was being built and San Francisco's environmentally conscious residents, she made sure services would be safe and natural. "The products we use in our specialty services are mostly organic and natural," Tan says. "I wanted Tiptoes to be a place where mothers and pregnant women can also visit, be comfortable, and not have to worry about the chemicals and odors that are usually associated with acrylics or gels."

The most requested service is the Mani Plus, which includes nail care, scrub, warm lotion massage, and a choice of mask or paraffin wax treatment. Another popular treatment is Relief for Tattered Tootsies, a lemongrass pedicure for dry, callused, and stressed feet that includes softening foot gel, scrub, mask for callus control, cream, and a paraffin wax treatment.

Although nails make up 80% of the business, the salon also does facials, waxing, massages, and brows and lashes. With the goal of growing the facial side of the business, they recently hired a new esthetician and ran a facial special to get clients interested. Private parties are also popular, with the salon hosting about three to four each month.

Locals on the Hill

Hines is an engineer, and Tan worked in IT/MIS (management information systems) before she earned her nail technician license three years ago. Coming from such varied backgrounds, they wanted to ensure that Tiptoes was "a nail spa for everyone."

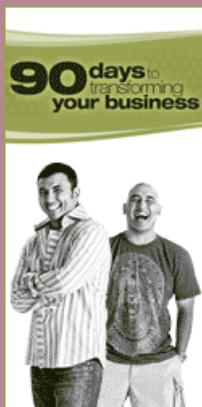
The neutral decor and colors were chosen so as not to exclude men, and Hines makes an effort to make them comfortable. He says the menu, except for maybe the Fruit Smoothie, is unisex, and men aren't shy about asking for services. There is also a Mini-Me mani and pedi for kids under 12.

Still, the majority of clients are professionals or stay-at-home moms who either live or work in the Potrero Hill area of the city, where the salon is located. A small percentage trek in from other parts of the Bay Area. Even though the space they rent is twice as large as what they



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were looking for, they snatched up the location because it was only three minutes away from their house. "It's a wonderful area because it's close to all the major freeways," says Hines. "There's parking, there's wonderful weather, there are great views in this neighborhood, and it's just a very close-knit community."

In addition to signage and walk-ins, cyber word-of-mouth, via yelp.com, has helped Tiptoes spread the word. Representatives of the business-review site contacted them to see if they wanted to advertise on the Tiptoes page, reserved only for sites with a high number of hits. Now, yelpers who stumble upon the site can see advertisements for the most up-to-date specials and discounts.

Perks and Specials

Tiptoes offers an early-bird discount for services before three on weekdays, attracting professionals on their lunch breaks. The discount changes every few months. In addition, the salon has a loyalty program, where clients start earning points from the first time they have a service done. The client's name is entered into the database for every service she gets, and she automatically accumulates a point for each dollar spent. At 300, she begins receiving discounts for future services. Clients get points for referrals, and the referred friend gets them as well.

Time for Themselves

With the hectic schedule Tan and Hines keep up pampering others, the time they have for themselves isn't during the traditional weekend, but on Mondays and Tuesdays, when the salon is closed. "Mondays and Tuesdays have become our weekends. When Howard gets home from work, we try to take the kids out and spend quality time with them," she says. "It does get a little crazy juggling a new business with a family and two children, but we are very happy about what Tiptoes has become today."

KEYWORDS: SALON PROFILE, MODERN NAIL SALON, OPENING YOUR OWN SALON

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