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Wellness Companies – a New, Expansive Enterprising Sector for Women

Gunilla Lönnbring

This paper is based on an interview study among female entrepreneurs within a very rapidly growing service sector in Swedish business life – the sector called wellness or wellbeing. Female entrepreneurs constitute a large part of this sector. In general, around a third of new entrepreneurs in Sweden are women, but in this sector the proportion is much higher. The customer base is heterogeneous and includes the young and the old, men as well as women. This growing wellness sector is based around a broadened health perspective which also includes social, emotional and spiritual aspects and it exists in a kind of borderland to healthcare and care giving. This sector often views health from a subjective perspective and aims for quality of life and wellbeing. It provides services like massage, relaxation, keep fit and different types of meditation. In this paper I will focus the background to this new service sector and the changes in society connected to it.

Part I

The Business, a change of values and a desire for “outer and inner style”

So what is the nature of the business that these wellness entrepreneurs are working in? How do they describe it and its development? How can we understand the interest in health, and the rapid emergence of the wellness sector? The “feel-good” business is a very healthy sector, showing growth in virtually the whole country.

In order to really get to the bottom of its success, it is necessary to
use as a starting point some comprehensive shifts in society and in values; shifts that have occurred over long periods of time. Historical perspectives are useful in understanding the status of the body and of wellbeing in a society. It is likely that explanations are to be found on different levels, and in changes in both material conditions and in value systems.

One of these changes is of course the often mentioned process of individualization in the West (for example Giddens 1997, 2000, Featherstone 1994, Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

Our body is what we present to others when we are free from other traditional and cultural identities, and being well and healthy is something that our society considers important – perhaps most important in life. Drastically put, it can be said that our society is obsessed with health. Throughout history, suffering and illness runs like a red thread through people’s lives, people had to put up with the life and the fortunes that they were given. (Kallenberg & Larsson 2004, Kallenberg 2007). During the 19th Century, scientific progress in areas like medicine brought along a shift in world view and people got an increased ability to affect their own destiny. Nowadays, it is not enough to take responsibility for one’s own health and combat disease, even normal changes associated with age can be seen as a threat.

Medicating and taking action against the normal obstacles in life are also part of this. (a.a). People have thereby become responsible for their own health; from the luck of the draw to the obligations of health.

The wellness industry has become part of the solution to the problems of wellbeing. And the signs are that the industry is offering working solutions. Martinsson (2008) has conducted a comprehensive survey of studies, mostly American in origin, dealing with the results of different
wellness enterprises. She finds that virtually all studies show successful results for the enterprises, meaning that they have in some way helped people increase their wellbeing. Martinson stresses that this is not entirely easy to interpret; encouragement, engagement and expectations can of course play a role, and so can the fact that people can change their way of life and their behaviour as a result of being made aware of problems in their current ways. General health problems can also pass and heal by themselves over time.

Wellbeing, keep fit, healthcare and wellness – the titles vary – are subjects that have attracted a lot of interest in newspapers, specialty magazines, TV programmes and the general debate, ranging from serious and scientifically based advice on health, diet and fitness to commercial “body and lifestyle makeovers”

There are a few more tangible changes in society that affect the industry and which came up frequently in the interviews with wellness entrepreneurs. Based on the interviewees’ own views of their sector, these factors can be summarised under the following headings:

*Demography and those born in the 1940s.* The wellness entrepreneurs feel that their clients and guests cover a very wide age range. This is not an industry that only attracts young people. Many activities are available regardless of age and many of them can be adjusted to fit the wishes and abilities of the individual customer. “I get all sorts of people, old and young and in between. Some are really energetic and some a bit frailer with some aches and pains here and there. But it is definitely not just younger people like I think it used to be actually when I started out around seven years ago. Back then it was mainly younger people who wanted to be even better looking and more energetic”
One obvious reason for the emergence of the sector is the demographic change that will lead to an increased proportion of older people in society, both in absolute terms, and in proportion to other age groups in society. It is estimated that in 2020, 20% of the Swedish population will be aged 65 or over. (Majanen, Mellberg & Norén 2007).

This has sometimes been described as a huge burden for the younger age groups to carry, but economical analysts are starting to turn the tables. It is also an enormous opportunity to develop a new industry with potential for growth both nationally and internationally. Those born in the 1940s are a large generation, a record size generation that have a demand for both services relating to health care, and also a desire to continue feeling well, maintaining their good lives and striving towards wellbeing. The signs are that it is not a generation that will passively enjoy a quiet old age where demands for good health, extrovert living and new interesting experiences are restricted.

It is a generation that wants to continue to travel, be active and invest in themselves. It is an added bonus if children and grandchildren can be given some support, but it is a generation that is not willing to scrimp and save in order to leave a large inheritance, or to give up their own interests in order to serve younger generations. This energetic, educated and financially strong generation is also looking for a different type of care than is currently offered in the traditional public sector. They are relatively fit and healthy and want to manage on their own for as long as possible. They will in all likelihood stand up for their freedom of choice and make demands as patients and care recipients. Studies show that among people who are 65 and older, a quarter would like to keep working for as long as possible, half are intending to spend all their money on themselves and they feel that life between 65 and 80 is the same as life before, only with more freedom (Majanen, Mellberg &
Norén 2007).

People in the so called “third age”, who are retired but still overall healthy and mobile are expected to become a large and important customer group in the wellness sector. A selective survey of promotional and information materials from gyms and exercise centres show that it is no longer a given that the covers are adorned by young, fit women. Men in their upper middle age with headlines such as “The best thing you can save for old age is yourself” and “You are never too old to be younger” are sending new messages to new groups.

It is in many ways controversial to describe this demographic change as a crisis alone.

From a humanistic perspective, it is hard to bemoan the fact that people do not die but stay relatively active and well into older age. This is in fact what we were trying to achieve with the welfare politics of the post war years. But even from a growth perspective, this development has potential. This generation is healthy enough that many people can chose to remain longer in the labour market than previous generations, something that is actually financially encouraged by the state. It is also a group that will want to choose their care when the time comes.

A new law in Sweden, (Lagen om valfrihetssystem (LOV),) promotes a development towards more freedom of choice for the elderly and for people with reduced mobility. People can also choose social service providers. In addition to state providers, voluntary organisations and private companies are available. (SOU 2008:15).

*Men as customers...* The product supply of the wellness industry is no longer a concern for women only. Men have increasingly become part
of the customer base and the prospective customers therefore not only cover all ages, but both sexes. Many of the female interviewees in the industry note that it is acceptable for men to invest in their looks, their health and their wellbeing. It is completely legitimate for men of all ages. Facial massage, peeling, manicure and diet awareness are not only female concerns. One female entrepreneur says: “...what was previously considered typically “girly stuff” is now completely ok for guys and older men as well. And younger guys are just as interested in their appearance as women are.” Companies and the workplace are also a customer group on the increase; a trend that is supported by tax laws concerning staff health promotion, a bigger responsibility for rehabilitation as well as an increased financial responsibility on behalf of companies when staff are absent due to illness.

....and women as entrepreneurs. People who start up companies tend to start them within the sector where they were previously employed. Women’s paid employment is notably rooted in the public health and care sector. When enterprising is on the increase among women (if not quite to the same extent as men’s new enterprising) they direct their enterprising ideas towards the sector where they have their silent, informal and formal knowledge and contacts, and where they can develop ideas that have arisen through previous work experiences. Their enterprising takes place both within the health and care sectors, and especially in the area of personal and cultural services. They are interested in “working with people and making them feel good” and in many cases they want to use as a starting point interests and knowledge from their previous employment in their enterprising.

Commerce and physical contact. The wellness industry is closely related to the health and care sectors but it is still not quite part of it. Large
numbers of people feel that life in society and in the workplace is stressful with few or no chances for natural relaxation. The dramatic increase in absenteeism due to illness during the late 1990s and the early 2000s with diagnoses such as burn out, exhaustion and other related diagnoses, can at least partly be traced back to a working life that demands that we are constantly “plugged in”. It is the age of the full agenda within all professions. One female entrepreneur states that even family life can be stressful with all its activities for the children and a feeling of having to be active and take part in everything. “It feels like we have to live such interesting lives”. Wellness is a commercialisation of the need to just think about oneself, to get physical contact and closeness, a moment of peace and no demands. “People just want to stop performing for a while”, as one entrepreneur described it.

Many people who come to the industry’s activities are not necessarily unwell in any medical sense, or even close to it, but they do not feel well either and they feel invigorated by being pampered for a while and putting their own wellbeing at the centre of things. It is legitimate to treat yourself and buy the quality of life that you then experience. You buy a feel-good experience and consume closeness and care for the body and soul. One woman whose company is in the area of massage, keep fit and gym activities expresses it this way “people are not perhaps ill as such but if you look at the whole picture, they are not really well either. Some find it difficult to describe what is wrong and why they are coming to me. And sometimes there is nothing much wrong either. Before it was more shameful to spend money on this stuff but I don’t think it is anymore”.

Consumption of values and lifestyle. In the conversations with the wellness entrepreneurs it is evident, on the one hand, that their business exists in a zone where the lines are blurred between money, experiences and
culture. On the other hand, they are entirely aware of the fact that they are selling emotions, experiences and a lifestyle. Concepts like lifestyle and wellbeing are frequently mentioned. One self employed entrepreneur with a small spa and massage business says for example: “Well it’s not like selling shoes and repairing cars. But what I do does touch other parts of a person than normal shops and businesses do.” Meaning and values are built into goods and services that appeal to the consumer’s lifestyle and identity creation: “they (the customers) also want to feel that they are unique and special in some way and that they get something extra when they come to me. Something that you cannot buy in a normal shop where people go every day.”

Wellness and other experience based enterprise exist within a motivational system, where consumption is a way of creating meaning and identity. These are two central aspects of wellness enterprising. On the one hand, these companies deal with people’s lifestyles and are culturally coded but they also exist in the borderland between economy and experience, which the entrepreneurs fully understand. There are also many signs that the economy of the future will be dominated by a service economy – often knowledge and experience based – and it can also help us understand why wellness services are difficult to capture as a business idea, something that has been expressed by the female entrepreneurs, and which can also create problems in relation to the actors around the entrepreneurs. It is borderland enterprising which would be unknown territory for credit givers and others that can support enterprising. The companies’ business ideas can often appear strange to others. This context that wellness entrepreneurs are working in is partly new, compared to the production and marketing environments of the forest or the steel industries.
The welfare society is retiring. It is perhaps fair to say that the 1960s and 70s were the golden days of the welfare state and the public geriatric care in Sweden. The Social Services Act of 1982 was created in a climate where there was a strong belief that the public sector had the ability to put life in order. Within local government geriatric care it is apparent that during this period more and more elderly people received more support, for example in the form of foot and hair care and swimming and exercise. The care of the home and of the body were both considered to be the responsibility of the local government. Friendship supports and social aspects were also important factors in the public care of the elderly (Johansson 2007).

The years of financial crisis in the 1990s was one factor that brought about a change in the way that the state and the local governments viewed public involvement, and many forms of support and services disappeared from the public service. Some of these services disappeared completely, and some were transferred to the private sector.

One partial interpretation could be that the wellness industry has come to fill the void that was created when the welfare organisations in society started to demand a higher level of incapacity and ill health before they would get involved.

The individual has had to assume responsibility for a larger part of his health and services previously available through the local government are now available to purchase on the open market. One female entrepreneur who previously worked in geriatric care says: “...it is actually very gratifying working with older people. It is very easy to get them more mobile and happy. Many are also quite lonely and never have anybody touch them. That alone can be very nice.” The entrepreneurs also feel that an increasing number of customers of all ages want to do something for their own
health. They no longer feel secure in the role of a passive patient at the doctor’s; they want to be actively involved in their own health.

“They are not satisfied with having the doctor saying:” Come back if you are not better within two weeks”. They want to work on getting better themselves and that’s where I can get to help. And then I am also someone to talk to about their health, and if they have been ill. We can kind of create a wellness strategy together.”

Swedish studies of the health, life habits and life situations of older people also show that older people as a whole are healthier and that society’s resources are focused on the very oldest, the most fragile of the elderly and those without close relations. (Agahi et al, 2005). The remaining elderly people therefore become a group that has to buy feel-good services like foot care, massage and physical training themselves.
Part II

Female entrepreneurs in the wellness sector:
Family orientated, small scale…and quality

The entrepreneurs in the wellness sector do of course share many conditions with other small business entrepreneurs in Sweden. So what are these shared conditions?

“I don’t really want to expand, but sometimes it feels almost like you have to. Of course I want to do a good job but it is still more important to be able to spend time with the children while they are small. I think this job is fun but it will never be more important than looking after the kids. Am I allowed to say that?”

This statement from a female solo entrepreneur, made with some hesitation, can in many ways be seen as typical for women with small businesses in rural areas. The company is small, even as small as possible, and fulfills more purposes than just making a living. The family focus with children at the centre is clear. That is a condition that this woman entrepreneur shares with many others. The business is a way to combine work and caring for the family.

Women have always been entrepreneurs in order to provide for themselves and their families. But despite the fact that they have run businesses “throughout time”, women are underrepresented as entrepreneurs and their businesses are small. In the wellness sector however, there are more female than male entrepreneurs. In general, women’s proportion of new enterprising has increased, in particular since the 1990s, and more than 30 % of all new businesses are run
by women (ITPS 2007). The reasons behind this increase are likely to be very complex and are to be found in shifts in both the gender structures and in the labour market. A decreasing public sector results in a smaller labour market for women, but it also opens up the field for private solutions. A structural change in the labour market has been advantageous for the service enterprising sector of new enterprising, and this is the sector in which women start businesses. Manufacturing constitutes a smaller proportion of new enterprising. Women’s new enterprising takes place primarily within retail and service, the areas in which women also had their salaried employment. Enterprising does show the same segregation as the rest of the labour market. New start ups are generally small and a clear majority only employ one person. This is to a very high extent also the case among the wellness businesses. The entrepreneurs also have a limited desire for expansion; being small scale is seen as a value in itself by many in the business.

Women’s and men’s enterprising show a lot of similarities. They share their reasons for starting companies; wanting to realise your own ideas, being your own person and work after your own head. Gender is therefore not the only and perhaps not even the most important dimension when studying the organisation of enterprising, but some of the conditions for female enterprising can legitimately be seen as gender specific and thus problematic when using an established model for enterprising assessment. And there is one such significant difference between men and women entrepreneurs. Only women do generally state that enterprising can be a way of combining provision and family care. And so, for some businesswomen, their own company is included in an adjustment strategy between family focus and a working life. (Lönnbring 2003).
A woman in the wellness sector, who runs her own business from home, gives a typical statement on this:

“I am not booked up every day and that means I can do other things. And I have two children, so I am home when they come home from school. But I am not making a living this way”.

For women in rural areas, this can be a very conscious choice, when the formal infrastructure is weak and long commutes may be a reality for everyone in the family. If the husband commutes into town for work, an own business close by can be a possibility to keep together and facilitate the family project while contributing to the family’s provision.

Despite the fact that female entrepreneurs in general are not that focused on large scale operations, many of the interviewees express a clear emphasis on quality. One woman, with a full time fitness business says: “It’s important to have quality in everything. From booking to leaving. Quality pays in the long term. They should feel like kings and queens when they are here”.

Many of the entrepreneurs who were interviewed have experience of working in similar sectors. Some examples of this would be that several of them worked with massage at a nearby hotel with a large spa and fitness area, some have worked as nurses and nurse’s aids in the public health care system, and some have worked in various tourism enterprises. In addition to a desire for freedom and doing things your own way, a main factor in leaving a salaried employment is a strong desire to make things better. There has been a longing for a more personalised, small scale operation where the customer is seen and is allowed to take up time, there has been a desire to realise ideas
and views in the health area, and there has been a feeling that many traditional health and care operations put little emphasis on wellbeing. So the motivation behind the start up enterprise has been innovation. A desire to do things in a new and better way.

Working on a small scale, which is often described as a problem in enterprising in general and in female enterprising in particular, is here defined as a quality factor by the entrepreneurs themselves. Many have wanted to move away, for the sake of their own health as well, from what they perceive as a conveyor belt principle in customer treatment. For example, one interviewee talks about her previous job in a large spa hotel. “Working in a spa was tough. I started at nine, went home at eight and had one customer per hour. In the end I couldn’t cope. I didn’t feel human when I got home. So I got sick leave and saw things from a different perspective”.

In general, female entrepreneurs are less willing to take financial risks than their male counterparts, while male entrepreneurs worry more about social risks. Other distinguishing features for women entrepreneurs are that they are bad at charging money, they have problems with marketing, and they sometimes find it difficult to explain their business idea as a viable project worth investing in. More women than men also regard their enterprising as a part time job, which is part of the adjustment that they make for family and this is a pattern that is also evident in the general labour market. The traditional business skills are sometimes lacking and it is the content of the business that is interesting, rather than the desire to run a business.

All of this is shown in the interviews with the wellness entrepreneurs, only more accentuated, as they also have a new sector to defend. And
this is of course problematic when encountering “normal” business life and its peripheral actors. Women’s new companies in the wellness sector run the risk of appearing as strange and different risky projects, previously unknown to credit givers and other actors. The concepts of a garage or an accounting firm are well known and without problems, the same can perhaps not be said about ear candles and meditative therapy. One entrepreneur says that she has sometimes found it difficult to explain her business idea and that she sometimes wished that her company was based on better known activities: “I can hear myself how vague and woolly I sound when I try to talk about it. So sometimes I wish that I worked with something that hurt when you drop it on your toes, as the saying goes”.

The local business and enterprise advisor talks about how she has tried to support and get financial help for future service providers in the industry and come up against administrators who have had difficulty dealing with and judging these, for them, unknown activities. In one case, this uncertainty was expressed as “Phew – can’t they buy a machine or something.”

The local connection is important to the enterprising women. It is evident in the interviews that it is important to be part of the business industry where you live. “It wouldn’t be at all the same if I worked somewhere else. This is where I want to help people.” This can be interpreted in different ways. Firstly, many women lack effective professional networks and it is instead family and the husband in particular who provides an important personal and emotional support in their enterprising. Secondly, it is the part time factor that results in a stronger local connection, while the husband sometimes works in a different location. Women do other things too, in connection with their business; often relating to the home, the children and the family. This is also seen as important by the women
who run these businesses and that ties them strongly to the local place. Children’s leisure activities and school, the organisation of the family’s day to day life and of course the customers’ local connections all mean that the entrepreneurs have a strong feeling for the importance of local community, and they have knowledge about what happens locally.

It is important to the interviewed entrepreneurs that their business is run in the place where they live. Partly because they, like many other female entrepreneurs, have their work life balance tied to their enterprising and their day to day life, but also because they actually want to mean something to their community and the people in it.

One entrepreneur says…. “wellness can become like a kind of identity for this community, that the local government can use in different contexts. And it also means that the product of my work stays here too”. She feels that wellness can be part of the local governments marketing strategy and make the place more attractive. It is important to be a resource for people’s health and wellbeing where you live. The entrepreneurs also feel supported by the community. For example, one woman who is a solo entrepreneur within classic massage says…. “All groups visit me and everybody here is supportive”. In this case, the location is also important and favourable in another way, according to the interviewees. Places of natural beauty can be healing, seen from a wellness perspective, and themselves be an asset in reaching wellbeing. “The nature here and me, we work together so to speak”. Sector and place can pull in the same direction according to the entrepreneurs.
Innovation and Expansion

How do the entrepreneurs view growth and the innovative side of their business? We have already established that the business idea itself is often innovative; these wellness entrepreneurs want to support health and wellbeing in a new and better way. That was in fact the reason that many of them started their businesses. Despite this, many entrepreneurs find it difficult to define their own service as innovative. Innovation is associated with material production in particular some technically advanced application. “What do I hear about when I hear innovation? Well, maybe rockets or gene mutations and stuff or new engines that run without petrol. But not massage, I wouldn’t say that.”

Service development in this area is not seen as innovative by the entrepreneurs themselves and even among business actors in society in general, it can be difficult to establish service innovations as just that; innovations. Even though many entrepreneurs have well developed and creative ideas about how their concept can contribute something new – as a new service, or as part of a whole in conjunction with other wellness entrepreneurs. The interviewed entrepreneurs express that they can and want to give something else with their business idea; something that does not exist in the location, or does not exist at all. And the female entrepreneurs – without exception – also express that they have something important to contribute; something that is important both to the people in the place and on a local community level. And still, innovation is not what it is called in their vocabulary. Perhaps it is a vocabulary that is based in industrial society and its description of technological products, which does not feel natural to the entrepreneurs in the area of service production.

It may be somewhat of a stereotyped phrase but these entrepreneurs can be described as being very passionate about what they do and they
are happy in their business role. And they are also prepared to find new forms and ways to develop both themselves and their companies. “You want to try and feel that freedom and make your own choices. I can’t imagine being an employee. The though makes me shiver: even if it’s hard sometimes, I can’t imagine anything else.”

One entrepreneur also feels that the many wellness entrepreneurs locally are driving the development of the companies. “There are many of us here. It’s important to have scope. It’s what most people do – the more you learn, the more you want to do.”

But at the same time, they find it difficult to relate to... “...that strange talk about innovation and growth and growth and growth. It makes you wonder what growth actually is. Catastrophes and terrible event also create growth. What kind of growth is it. I studied economy but I understand less and less of that talk. There must be human growth as well. But that never seems to count. Like it is worth nothing that people feel better.”

The entrepreneurs also have, in many cases, concrete plans to develop their business but not primarily through expansion. Several interviewees have developed thoughts about new collaborations, about new contexts, starting co-operative models and to renew and improve their product. The same results can be found in a study of innovative entrepreneurs within the health and care sectors. (Hedberg & Pettersson 2006). The interviewees have identified alternative ways of helping people, they strive to improve their business and they are up to date in their area of knowledge.

Women’s enterprising has some specific traits compared to men’s enterprising and the wellness sector does of course have its own special conditions. But it is also important to emphasise the multi faceted
picture that emerges among the wellness entrepreneurs, and which also exists in other research about female entrepreneurs (see for example Lönnbring 2003). It can be easy to over emphasise women’s family focus, small scale thinking and caution. Although they are in a clear minority, there are also among the interviewees, genuine entrepreneurs who are risk takers, pushing projects and willing to expand. Just as there are among male entrepreneurs. And on the other hand, Swedish enterprising – men’s and women’s – is a question of small scale enterprising.

References


