

HOW TO TOOT YOUR OWN HORN

The last item a wise farmer will cut from a strained budget is seeds, because seeds that don't get planted will never bear fruit. Likewise, the wise massage therapist won't cut back on marketing simply because times are lean. Marketing is the only way to plant the seeds that will produce a flourishing practice.

The key to surviving a tough economy is to look for low-cost but still-effective marketing strategies, experts say. Be creative. Be bold. And don't be shy about tooting your own horn.

Here are some ideas from experienced marketing professionals on ways massage therapists can promote and grow their practices without investing a lot of money.

1. LEAVE A BUSINESS CARD WITH EVERYONE YOU MEET

"Carry your business cards everywhere," advises Joell Diane, spokeswoman for WaterColors, a printing company based in Biloxi, Mississippi, that specializes in massage and bodywork promotion. "If you go to dinner, leave a business card with the tip. Nobody needs a massage more than waiters and waitresses."

Consider printing different business cards that target specific groups. Does your child play organized sports? "You could get a business card or a postcard printed up that has all the practice dates and game days of your kid's soccer team, and hand them out to all the kids' parents," suggests Eileen Ryan, marketing coordinator for Natural Touch Marketing of Olympia,

Washington. "It could say 'Mary Ann's Massage—I cater to soccer moms.' That's something they'll keep on their refrigerators or in their wallets."

2. FIND A PARTNER

If you can identify another practitioner who deals with your target audience, you can share the costs of a promotion. "Say you specialize in sports massage," says Cherie Sohnen-Moe, an author, business consultant, and seminar leader on marketing strategies who is based in Tucson, Arizona. "Maybe you could team up with a sports psychologist and do a mailing together."

Or perhaps the manufacturer of a product you carry will partner with you in promoting your use of their product line. You might also find local businesses willing to let you insert flyers into their mailings for a small fee, Sohnen-Moe suggests.

3. BE SAVVY ABOUT ELECTRONIC ADVERTISING

One of the easiest and most cost-effective ways of attracting new customers is through savvy Internet marketing. Zac Adler, CEO of Bodywork Sites, a company based in Santa Barbara, California, that designs websites for massage therapists, recommends Google's AdWords (www.adwords.com) for therapists who haven't had much training in Internet search protocols. When someone does a Google search for the keywords you've defined (for example, *massage* and *Taos, New Mexico*), your ad may appear next to the search results.

"You only pay when someone actually clicks on your ad and goes to your website, so you're only paying for visitors," Adler says. "You're catching people right when they're looking for a massage therapist in your town. This is easy to set up, even if you're not technologically skilled. Google does a good job of holding your hand as you go through the setup steps. In my mind, if I had a friend looking to grow a business in this wintery economic climate, I can't think of something that would produce more in a shorter amount of time."

4. MINE YOUR CLIENT BASE

"Make sure you're touching base with your clients at least twice a year," Diane advises. "Send them something on their birthdays, and contact





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them a second time right before the holidays. A lot of times sending them something toward the end of October or early November, letting them know about gift certificates or packages for Christmas will boost your business. It's also good to send something before the spring holidays, like Mother's Day."

Such in-house marketing is proven to be extremely cost-effective, says Ken Cassidy, president and owner of Cassidy's Management Consulting of Long Beach, California. "Birthdays, anniversaries, new client referrals, any type of marketing at all, especially done electronically, can reduce your marketing costs down to almost zero and has greater impact and effectiveness," he says. "Make sure to send out thank-you

cards to every new client that walks into your salon. To do this, you have to keep your database current, but you need to do that anyway."

5. THINK WEDDINGS

Befriending a wedding planner could provide a lucrative source of income. "Massage makes a great gift for bridesmaids," Diane notes. "Everybody in the wedding party is so stressed out they can't see straight. If the wedding planner can set up massages for the entire wedding party as part of the service, the wedding planner actually pays the therapist. This may require taking on a partner [massage therapist],

because if it's a huge wedding party, one person can't do it all. This is an avenue most people don't explore."

6. LOOK INTO COMPANY NEWSLETTERS

Targeted publications are inexpensive to advertise in and offer tightly focused markets. "You already know who you're talking to," Ryan says. "We have farm supply stores that do a newsletter. You might buy an ad offering neck and shoulder massage for people



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who've been bailing hay." Similarly, an ad in a pet supplies store newsletter might target dog walkers. Once you know precisely who the audience for a small-circulation publication is, create an ad geared directly at that audience's needs and desires.

7. DISTRIBUTE A NEWSLETTER

Use ready-made newsletters and drop some personalized content into it, or design your own. The end result, either way, will be a marketing tool you can send electronically or that you can distribute by hand or by mail.

"It just gets the word out," says Jon Lumsden, owner of Massage Marketing of Thayer, Missouri. "Add a discount coupon to a personalized newsletter, and it gives the person that receives it a reason to call you."

Lumsden adds a word of caution about creating your own promotional materials. "Misspelled words, grammatical errors, confusing or poorly worded sentences ... will give your marketing materials an unprofessional image and could actually do more harm than good," Lumsden says. "For the same reason, you should have a good sense of design if you plan to invest your valuable time in attempting to create

your own newsletters. I usually tell therapists who are considering creating their own newsletters that it's a great idea if they enjoy the entire process and have the skills required. Otherwise, they're just burdening themselves with a task that will drain them of time and energy that could be spent on seeing clients and making money."

8. READ THE NEWSPAPER

Your local newspaper can be a ready source of information about people who may be in need of massage, especially if you live in a small town. "Watch for birth announcements," Diane advises. "Send a letter to the new mama and daddy, because having a baby is very stressful."

9. TARGET YOUR CLIENTS' FRIENDS


"People move in clusters," Ryan says. "People who work in the same office often go to the same hairdresser. They go to the same massage therapist. I'd ask my clients how to get more of their colleagues' business." Offer group discounts or two-for-one deals. Put together packages geared specifically to the needs of a small group of coworkers. If they work in cubicles, put together a sheet illustrating

stretching exercises they can do in the office. "Targeting specific groups is ultimately a cost-saver," Ryan says. "Don't broadcast. Narrow-cast."

10. CAPITALIZE ON PEOPLE'S RELUCTANCE TO SPEND BIG MONEY

In a worrisome economy, small indulgences are still an attractive option. "You're talking stress-busters," Sohnen-Moe says. "You can market yourself as a way to stay sane in crazy times."

Put together small packages that are easy to afford. Offer short pick-me-up massage sessions in addition to hour-long massages. Make sure you've got some inexpensive items available for purchase. Someone who has just abandoned hopes of a week-long vacation this year may find some consolation in a \$45 stress buster. **m&b**

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