

Defining (and dealing with) Your Competition

When you hear the word *competition*, what comes to mind? Massage Envy, or maybe the massage therapist or day spa down the street? True enough those may be our competitors, but we need to think outside the box. In reality, there are a lot of other places that people can spend their money—and their time—and it may not have anything to do with massage at all.

Luxury or Necessity?

I personally consider receiving massage a medical necessity and a priority. To some people, massage is an occasional luxury, or something they do just to pamper themselves. In troubled economic times, such as the recession we've been in for the past few years, luxuries and pampering sometimes fall by the wayside in favor of the car payment and the mortgage. My own area has taken a hard hit from the recession, with a current unemployment rate of almost 15%, one of the highest rates in our state. In spite of that, our business hasn't suffered—but some of our clients have. Other small business owners who have traditionally had weekly or biweekly standing appointments have cut back on their frequency of visits and let me know that it was strictly a financial decision.

Realistically, even for the client who considers massage as part of their medical treatment, or wellness plan, there are plenty of other things that can take precedence. For one thing, the majority of health insurance doesn't cover massage, although therapists who work in a medical or chiropractic office may be able to bill major medical insurance, whereas a stand-alone practitioner usually cannot. Co-payments and medical costs in general are going up and benefits are going down, and many people are taking deductibles as high as \$10,000 or more in an effort to keep their premiums affordable. The average school teacher in my state pays more than \$500 per month for health coverage; people who don't belong to a group and have to pay individual rates often pay even more. It's estimated that 25%-30% of Americans have no health insurance at all. A major sickness or injury can be a financial catastrophe. Those who can't afford health insurance are in all likelihood among the group that thinks of massage as luxury, rather than a necessity.

For those who view massage as a luxury, there are a lot of other things that might fall into that same category...a trip to the hair or nail salon, a dinner out at a fancy restaurant, a concert, or a vacation. Even a trip to the movies these days is expensive. A movie and snacks for a family can easily top \$100. What's a massage therapist to do? How can we keep our market share of discretionary money when people are struggling financially, and how can we change the mindset of those who think massage is just a luxury?

Comparing Apples to Oranges

We do not, of course, claim that massage is the be-all end-all substitute for regular medical care. However, we've all experienced clients telling us they've been able to cut down on visits to the doctor, or the amount of pain medication they're taking. Comparatively speaking, massage is usually more affordable than a handful of prescriptions and multiple visits to the doctor. There are a lot of people who prefer a more natural approach to pain and stress relief. One of the best ways to get this message out is to cultivate referrals from physicians and other health care professionals. It's up to us to educate the mainstream providers about massage therapy. So much of the media tends to portray massage in a bad light, and we have to combat that and let doctors know what it is we really do. In recognition of the trend of people seeking more natural ways of healing, many doctors are open to at least getting the information—but don't sit around waiting for a doctor to call on you. It's up to *you* to approach *them*.

There are a number of different avenues to getting doctor referrals. Visit your local hospital and speak to the human resources person and the community education director. Every hospital recognizes an annual doctor's appreciation and nurse's appreciation day or week, so arrange to go there to do chair massage on those days—even if you do it for free. You are going to reap future rewards from making the contacts. Hospitals announce educational events all the time, such as "Dr. Smith will be giving a presentation on Managing Your Stress this Friday at 4 p.m." Attend a few of those, and approach the doctor with business cards in hand at the end of the talk. You could run your own promotion offering a discount to other health care professionals during "Health Professionals Appreciation Week." Create a cover letter introducing yourself and explaining the benefits of massage, enclose a couple of timely research articles from PubMed about massage, and mail or hand deliver to local doctor's offices, along with a supply of your business cards and your own card holder. Make it as convenient as possible for the doctor to refer to you.

The Frugal Consumer

The way to a frugal person's heart—and pocketbook—is by demonstrating *value*. It's not that frugal people don't spend money; they just want to feel they are getting a good value, and a bargain, at the same time. It's time for a healthy dose of client education! The same as with the physicians, we have to educate the public—at least that segment of it that isn't already massage-savvy—that they're *helping themselves by getting massage*. We know the benefits of massage; what we need is for everyone to know it.

How many times do you put your hands on someone who has no problems at all? No taut muscles? No stress knots? No trigger points? Hardly ever; that's how often. Even those people who claim they're just coming in to treat themselves on their birthday have *something* going on in their body. Don't preach a sermon during the massage. Instead, wait until after and point out to them that so-and-so is going on in their shoulders, or comment on how tight their lower back felt, and give a gentle reminder that they could consider massage more frequently. Remember, *people want to know how something will benefit them*, so how massage is going to benefit them is the point you want to make when you're talking to clients.

I keep postcards printed that offer \$10 off on the next massage. If a new client, or someone who is very sporadic (like the ones that just come in on their birthday), leaves without rebooking, I'll wait a few days and send them the card with an expiration date on it of a month. That is often enough to get them back in.

Package deals are another way to appeal to the economically-minded client. My own package deal is "pay up front for 5, get one free." It cuts the price of each massage down—but I also have the satisfaction of knowing they'll be here for six visits. That's usually enough to convince them to schedule another appointment sooner rather than later.

Don't think it is all about discounting, though. Again, it is about *educating the client*. We've all had those first-time clients who say they've been in pain for days, weeks, months, or even years. They may have the idea that one massage is going to "fix" them. Avoid claiming that you can "fix" anyone in any amount of sessions, but do spend a few minutes talking with them pre-and post-session. Let them know up front that they will likely experience some relief after just one visit, but that in order to see real progress and get back to optimal condition, massage should be a part of their regular wellness plan. Other than "thank you," the most important phrase to offer at the conclusion of the visit is "When would you like to schedule another appointment?"

Collaborative Competition

I'm fond of shamelessly stealing that phrase from my friend and fellow North Carolinian, Felicia Brown. I'll take it a little further. Women, for example, like for their hair to look good, and may well consider a trip to the salon to be higher on the priority list than a trip to the massage therapist. What about collaborating with a neighboring salon to offer a package deal? It could look like this: "Main Street Massage and Serenity Salon are offering a special for ladies only the whole week of Mother's Day. Get your hair and nails done and a massage for \$150." You could share in the cost of any advertising; chances are good that some of *your* clients will visit *them* for the first time and vice versa.

What about the other things that are competing for the client's discretionary funds? That might be anything from the clothing store to the bowling alley to a trip to the beach. Realistically, we can't compete with every single thing, but we can maximize our opportunities. Networking with other business owners is key. Collect business cards from the people you do business with, and give them a few of yours. Attend the open houses and grand openings of other nearby businesses. Recommend them; they'll return the favor.

If your practice happens to be located in or near a vacation destination, bear in mind that while the ritzier hotels and resorts likely have a spa on property, the Holiday Inn does not. Approach the hotels, bed and breakfasts, and rental agents in town and ask if you can leave brochures, business cards or flyers there. The agents who rent condominiums to tourists at the beach and in ski areas, for example, usually have a guest notebook that stays in the rental and gives the guests an idea of where to go and what to do and see locally. Cultivating a relationship with the front desk staff and/or owners of local hotels and

motels, and rental agents—maybe by shooting *them* an occasional freebie or discount—could bring in a big amount of business. Even if you're not in a vacation destination, realtors are great people to cultivate mutual referral relationships with...they meet the new people who are moving to town. I've had business cards made for realtors who are referral sources to hand out to their prospects. They're our regular business cards with the printed message on the back, "Welcome to the neighborhood. You're a VIP if you're with Century 21, so here's \$10 off on your first massage."

The competition for consumer dollars is out there, but we don't have to let it get the best of us. By being pro-active, you'll be sure to get your share!