

What Is the Goal of Business?

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When students and experienced practitioners of acupuncture are asked this question, many answers are given, most of which pivot around a common theme: using the healing arts to help patients get well. Though these are the benefits of your service, they are not the goal of business. The goal of business in an open market system like the United States is to make money, period. This is how you evaluate the progress of your business -- by the money you make and keep.

Applying this principle, the underlying prescription for business success is high income and low expenses. However, making money is not and should not be the only driving force in your business, but it must be addressed each time you make a decision concerning its income and expense.

Here's an example: You so enjoy seeing patients benefit from your healing art that it does not concern you to treat almost all of your patients for little or no fee. The patients all get well and tell you how wonderful you are. At the beginning of the next month, the landlord asks for the rent on your office space; your employees want to be paid for the hours they worked; the bank asks for the mortgage payment on your house; and you have to go shopping for groceries. Suddenly, you realize that patient compliments are not going to pay your bills. The reality is that you must charge a fee for your services or you will go out of business. If you don't, then no one benefits from your care.

Here's another example. You have a patient who has been with you for years and pays for each visit in full. The patient allows you to meet your office and living expenses. This makes sense, based on the income and expense business formula. However, the picture changes when the patient suffers some tough times. His business has failed, and his house is being foreclosed. In short, he needs your care more than ever, but now he can't afford it. If you use the strict income and expense formula listed above, the patient can't pay, so he either does not get care or is referred to another provider. Your heart, however, says you are willing to take a loss to help this patient get through difficult circumstances, because you have enough income from the other patients to meet your practice and living expenses. (I personally call this "credits to heaven.")

Later in the year, the patient starts getting back on his feet and begins to pay you for your services. He is so grateful for your help in his time of need that he sends any and all people he knows to see you. The next thing you know, you have 20 new patients.

These examples of conflicts between the goal of business and your healing goals illustrate the need to acknowledge and think about making money whenever you make other decisions that affect your practice. If you lose sight of this primary goal of your healing arts business, you will not earn enough to keep your doors open to see patients, and you will be unable to share your healing skills with those who seek your care.

Note: A wonderful book, titled *The Goal* by Eliyahu M. Goldratt, written in a Socratic method, describes a manufacturing business which undergoes a transformation with the help of a consultant. It illustrates this point that applies to all businesses, whether they are manufacturers or

service-oriented. I consider it a must-read for anyone interested in the finer points of this topic.

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