

Just About To Graduate? We've Got Answers!

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We have had the pleasure to consult, mentor and teach students and practitioners through our role as clinical supervisors, [New England School of Acupuncture](#) faculty and CAM research investigators. This month's Q & A is dedicated to questions from students about to graduate and enter the wonderful world of practice.

Q: How do you choose a name for your business? Is it more important to choose something that means something to you, or something that is "catchy" for the community?

A: Make it memorable so that it is marketable. That includes the 3 S's: easy to spell, fairly short, and should stand out. It helps if your name identifies what you do. This paves the way for inquiry and makes it easier for people to find you. Yes, it should have meaning to you, however not just you. Your business name should be viewed and created as a part of larger strategy. For example, it should fit nicely with a visual and colors for example. Take your top three choices and narrow them down by feedback from others, availability of Web domains and research to assure that it is distinct enough from other similar businesses.

Q: What is a common assumption that new practitioners have that should be avoided?

A: The assumption we see most often is "being an excellent acupuncturist is the key to having a successful practice." Actually, your marketing skills are often a better indicator than your clinical skills of the success of your practice. There are plenty of places that make a better hamburger than McDonalds, right? So we would encourage you to make room for continuing education not just to develop your clinical expertise but also to develop your marketing, networking and presentation skills. There are lots of free online newsletters for which you can sign up, as well as numerous books and classes to consider and business coaches for hire.

Q: Must acupuncturists specialize in order to succeed?

A: Acupuncture curriculum does not easily support specialization because unlike allopathic training models, we study to be general practitioners. Many who specialize do so as a result of gaining experience in our practices, through continuing education and through self-study. The key is how to make yourself distinct: specialization is one means to that end, but certainly not the only path. Some of you may already have a distinction through other means. Some examples may include previous careers and skills, other medical training or cultural ties to a specific population. Consider how your background took you to study acupuncture and Asian medicine. The factors that influenced your career path will also help you to identify how you want your practice to grow.

Many students get stuck on confusing specialization with targeted marketing. Targeted marketing is considered by many business consultants to be the best use of your limited time and money. It ensures that your efforts are reaching the right people. So although as teachers, we may make you pick a few target markets, this does not mean that you will not also be attracting other types of patients to your practice.

Q: What are some things to think about when negotiating a contract and salary with an employer?

A: Salary splits range from 30 percent to 70 percent on both sides of the fence, depending upon what your contract includes, what populations you are serving and the expectations of each party.

Some questions to consider when deciding where to start the negotiations: How many years experience do you have? Do you have any special skills that are advantageous? Who incurs expense for advertising, rent, supplies, overhead, etc? Will you have phone, fax, photocopy privileges? Will the experience help your skills? Is it a place or cause with which you are aligned?

Some tips for the actual negotiation process: Role play salary negotiations in advance with someone else when at all possible. Even if the offer is what you want, always ask for a day or two to think it over. Politely sidestep salary (say it's negotiable, open or competitive) until you're confident they want to hire you, so that you have leverage. When asked point-blank about salary, counter by asking what the range is, so you know the boundaries. Consider perks and noncash benefits, which add value. When it comes time to put your offer on the table, command rather than demand.

Q: With the government's recent commitment to transforming health care with a focus on cost-effectiveness and preventative care, what opportunities do you think will be available in five years that are not currently available to acupuncturists?

A: There is a growing movement in the U.S. for integrative care. [The Institute of Medicine Summit on Integrative Medicine and the Health of the Public](#) addressed a variety of issues that will be of increasing importance in the next five to 10 years. We should be seeing more opportunities for collaboration with hospitals, health centers, insurers and researchers. Be sure that you're actively seeking out, meeting and partnering with local health care providers.

Q: I am graduating with a huge student loan to pay back. I am not independently wealthy, and I don't want to take on more debt by applying for a bank loan. Is it still possible for me to open and run a successful acupuncture practice?

A: Anything is possible with creative strategy. There are lots of ways to engage in practice with little or no start up funding. Here are a few ideas: Consider either treating patients in their homes. If your residence is zoned appropriately, treat patients in your home. Set up practice in an existing business and negotiate a payment based upon a percentage of the patient fee. Therefore you don't have a rent expense to carry while you build your patient base. Structure a corporate wellness clinic on site at businesses.

What are the public health contacts and services in your area? Can you become involved in community education or other projects? Could you provide group treatment in a community center or other gathering place? Your local church, YMCA or health center?

Q: I've been thinking about the idea of doing home care as part of my practice and was wondering if you had any suggestions for me in regards to making contacts and how to go about building that as part of my business.

A: Start your brainstorming with an analysis of the patient population. Who would be in need of or want home care in your area? Are these seniors with limited transportation? Wealthy people who prefer to enjoy services in their home? Disabled people on limited incomes? Each target will have a slightly different strategic approach. For each target, list out all the services and other providers that population might use.

This becomes your list of people with whom to build relationships. Review this list looking for those

six degrees of separation. Whom do you know who might know someone. Contact these groups; provide educational workshops to providers, case managers and their patients. Once you begin to see home care patients, don't forget to ask for referrals!

Q: If you want to work with a doctor whom you don't know, how can you get your information to the doctor without being stopped by the administrative assistant?

A: It is all about building the relationship, and the good news is that you have probably had experience with this already in a different context. If there were someone you wanted to date whom you didn't know, what approach would you take? Chances are, you'd try to find someone who knew that person through a series of connections that could make an introduction or "put in a good word." This approach can work in the doctor situation as well. Where did the physician train? Do your personal providers have any connections or know someone who might know someone? The time spent on this investigative mission is worth its weight in gold in the long run.

Don't start by trying to meet the head of your local hospital unless you already have some connection to that person. Because there may be some potential interest by hospital personnel who work in pain clinics, oncology centers or chemical-dependency treatment programs, start there. Get their attention, and you're more likely to make meaningful connections.

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