

Strategies for Marketing Your Practice

Denise Cicuto, LAc

I've been a licensed acupuncturist for only a few years so my memories of starting out are more recent than someone who has more experience. Over the past few years, I've seen some of my former classmates build thriving acupuncture practices, and I've seen some of them founder. I have asked for input from my mentors and colleagues because the more advice we can give to you, the better.

Traditional Networking

Don't sit in your office waiting for patients to come to you. If you were lucky, you had a practice-management class in acupuncture school. If not, purchase a copy of the book *Points for Profit*. I also recommend looking for a practice-management class in your community. It may be specific to health care workers or a more general one from your local [Small Business Administration](#). [SCORE](#) can be a great resource as well.

Tap into your intern experience. Did you work part-time for another acupuncturist while in school and get to observe their practice in action? What did you learn from that experience that you like and what will you do differently?

Don't work in a vacuum. You may work alone in your office but you don't have to do everything alone. Find a mentor and ask them for advice, whether it's about a difficult case and what formula to prescribe, or about how they handle insurance.

Ask your friends who have been in practice longer than you have about the basics in setting up your practice. My friend and colleague [Sabrina Kirkland](#) gave me a list of things I needed to do when I started out that included everything from where to order different supplies to how to get a business license.

Get together with colleagues and discuss cases. Join an online mailing list such as the [Chinese Herb Academy](#) where you can get advice from acupuncturists from all over the world.

Word of mouth is the best way to get new business. How do you spread the word about you? Ask patients to write testimonials for you. This is simple and it's free. Voila! Instant word of mouth.

Join a networking group. This was perhaps the single best piece of advice I got from my colleagues and from acupuncturist and business coach [Kirstin Lindquist](#). There's [BNI \(Business Networking International\)](#) and your local [Chamber of Commerce](#) to get you started. There are also groups specific to women and different demographic groups. Besides getting and giving referrals, being in a networking group with other professionals in different industries gives you the opportunity to explain acupuncture in plain English so that non-acupuncturists will understand you. In a networking group, you'll learn to do it in a very short period of time. This is sometimes called the "elevator pitch" or the "infomercial."

Networking groups also give you the chance to do some public speaking. I don't really enjoy public

speaking, but I volunteer as the Educational Coordinator of my BNI chapter so I'll get better at it. Arrange to speak at schools, community centers, bookstores, etc., to spread the word about Chinese medicine and your acupuncture practice.

Use Both "New" and "Old" Media

Make sure you have a Web presence. Online social networking also counts as word-of-mouth marketing. Get on sites like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Meetup to promote yourself for free. You can set up a fan page for your practice on Facebook and ask people to join and write reviews/testimonials. [Angie's List](#) is a consumer review site similar to Yelp but the difference is that consumers pay to use the list, whereas on Yelp you either have a free page or you can pay for an enhanced profile.

Web sites. There are options from almost "build-your-own" Web sites to hiring a graphic or Web designer to do one for you. It doesn't have to be fancy. A lot of people use the Internet to search for things, and having an ad in the phone book may be a waste of your marketing dollars. Be sure to learn about Search Engine Optimization when getting a Web site put together so you can help search engines find you.

[pb]*Newsletters.* From a simple newsletter written in your e-mail client to using a template on a site like [Constant Contact](#), sending out a newsletter is a gentle "Hi, I'm here!" reminder to your patients and potential patients about your services. When you're working on your newsletters, you may write a paragraph or two about Chinese medicine for the cold and flu season, or women's health. Save what you write in case you want to include it on your Web site later. Or, write a few articles about what you specialize in and you can have it on hand for future newsletters.

You don't need to reinvent the wheel to get promotional materials. You might not have a lot of advertising money to print up brochures or fancy flyers. Nowadays, you don't need to. But I urge you to do one thing: pay someone to design your business card. Your business card represents you to potential patients and business associates so be sure you like the impression you're leaving with them.

If you must use a service with free business card designs, please pay the extra money so you don't have that company's logo on the card. Some great advice I got from one of my business coaches is to get cards printed on mattepaper. It's a lot easier to write down an appointment time or any other information on a card if it's not glossy. Please keep in mind: there are many, many other fonts you can use on a card besides faux Chinese lettering fonts.

Promote Awareness

How do you explain liver qi stagnation and heart fire to people so they will understand? You've spent the past few years in a Chinese medicine bubble but your potential patients haven't. There are tools like the [Acupuncture Answer Book](#) that comes with instructions on how to give a talk about acupuncture while using the booklet that can help.

Promote Chinese medicine awareness in your everyday life. People might stop and ask you about your [Caution! Liver Qi Stagnation](#) t-shirt, the [Balance Your Qi](#) sticker on your car or even your [Acu Punk](#) messenger bag. They're great to break the ice and get people talking to you about Chinese medicine.

Volunteer. Find an organization you like and volunteer your time to do acupuncture. It will give you more acupuncture experience as well as the reward of working for a cause you believe in. If you are new to an area, it is also a great way to meet people in your community.

Stay Up to Date

Keep track of your continuing education requirements. We have a great opportunity as acupuncturists to keep learning long after school is over. Different states have different requirement for continuing education. Make sure you're aware of your state acupuncture board's and/or the [NCCAOM's](#) requirements. I know, you're starting out and you have a year or two until you have to renew your license. Why worry about more classes now?

The first time I went to the [Pacific Symposium](#), I saw acupuncturists scrambling to get just one or two more CEUs because their licenses were almost up for renewal. They would take any class, even if it didn't interest them. Please don't waste your money or your time. There are so many choices of classes, from acupuncturists you've never heard of before to renowned acupuncturists whose books you may have studied while in school.

Remember to take care of yourself.

That old saying "Healer, heal thyself" is so very important. You may have some very difficult cases. Sometimes people seek out acupuncture as a last attempt when other options have failed them. It's important not to take things too personally. You can be sympathetic without being empathetic. When I was recently having a rough day, a colleague sent me a link to this [article on dealing with patient expectations](#). A regular practice of tai chi, *qi gong*, yoga or meditation is a really good idea. Also remember to get regular acupuncture treatments for yourself. Try out other forms of alternative healing too. This gives you an opportunity to try different modalities first-hand and the chance to network with other alternative health care providers. We must take care of ourselves as we help others to do the same.

You're not just an acupuncturist; you're also a small-business owner. Make a commitment to start doing some of the things recommended here, as well as those recommended by your mentors, business coaches and colleagues. You'll be doing a lot to get yourself noticed, get patients calling you and keep them coming back.