

Making Your Practice Unique

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Open your local phone book and you'll find that you have lots of competition from other acupuncturists and healers with various backgrounds and modalities, traditional doctors, and more. That's the bad news. But the good news is that every acupuncturist is unique and offers something different. No matter how much competition you might have, you can still find a few ways to stand out from the crowd.

Below is a simple four-step process designed to help you figure out what makes your practice unique.

Step One: Highlight The Benefits Patients Receive

Get out a sheet of paper and a pen and begin listing every benefit patients can receive from your work as a practitioner. Keep the following things in mind as you work on this list:

- Remember to list benefits, not features. What's the difference? A feature is a "bell and whistle." A benefit is what the patient receives from the feature. For example, the fact that you always use new sterile needles is a feature. The extreme rarity of infections or other complications is the benefit.
- Be shameless! List every benefit you can think of, no matter how obvious, silly or boastful it might seem.
- Keep these questions in mind: What do I have to offer? What do I do, or offer, that is different than other acupuncturists? What kind of image and atmosphere do I want to project? What kind of patients do I want to attract? Where do I want to be in three, six, 12 months and in three, five, 10 years? How can I be extraordinary as an acupuncturist? Do I have any special training or skills? Do I specialize? Do I offer great prices and/or package deals? Do I speak certain languages? Do I practice TCM or 5-element acupuncture?

When you're done, sit back and take a long look at your finished list. The list is all the good you are willing to contribute to the world. Hopefully this is a long list.

Step Two: Examine Your Competitors

After completing your benefits list, your next step is to examine your competition. Open up the phone book or your local health pages and keep your eyes open for flyers and business cards from around town. Look for anyone in the field who treats the same or similar conditions and ailments that acupuncture can address. Each of these businesses will present benefits to their patients, including some that you might offer.

Take out your list from step one and cross off each benefit your competitors also offer. You'll probably find yourself crossing out most of your list. That's OK.

As you do this, you'll start to see benefits your competitors offer that you don't. These fall into one

of two categories:

- Something you forgot. If you do indeed offer the benefit but forgot to include it on your list, don't worry about it, and no need to put it on your list anyway.
- A competitive advantage. If one of your competitors offers an amazing benefit that you don't, then you need to decide if:
 1. You are capable of offering that same benefit, and if so, whether you want to or not and 2. Decide whether that benefit represents a barrier to your own success or if it's something you can use to distinguish yourself. If the former, you need to rethink your offerings. If the latter, rejoice! Filling a niche with your own unique offerings allows you to stand out from the crowd.

By the time you're done with this step, you will most likely have just a few items left on your list. Now, on to the next step.

Step Three: Find What You Can Offer

Take a look at the list of items that survived Step Two. You should be able to pick out three to five distinct benefits that you alone offer. If not, rethink your offerings until you can come up with at least three to five benefits that are unique. They can be as simple as "I have a quiet space for people to relax after treatment," "the *qi* in my waiting room is so soothing and calm," "I add Reiki to my treatments," or "I make my own blend of organic herbs."

These three to five benefits are what separate your practice from other acupuncturists and healers. They are what make you unique and special. They make you stand out from others and will help to drive patients to your practice. Your marketing efforts should revolve around your unique benefits. In business, we call unique benefits your competitive advantage.

Step Four: Your Clientele

The unique benefits that you uncovered in Step Three offer clues as to who your ideal patients are. They will be the people who will most resonate with your unique benefits.

Who are these people? Try to discover who your ideal patients are for yourself. The more labels you can apply to them, the better. Take a look at the traits below and write down information describing the types of people you'd like to attract to your practice. Look at traits like:

- Age
- Gender
- Occupation
- Income
- Location
- Religious/spiritual beliefs
- Ethnicity
- Hobbies/interests
- Marital status
- Health status
- Education
- Sexual orientation

For example, you might find that your practice is best suited to younger yuppie executives who may have high blood pressure caused by work and domestic stress and who love to fly kites.

Knowing who your ideal patient is allows you to market directly to those specific people without wasting your time and resources on the rest of the world. The idea is to market to that very select group of people who want what you and you alone have to offer through your unique benefits. This is called nanocasting — the opposite of broadcasting.

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