



YOUR PRACTICE / BUSINESS

Peer Points: In The Business of Herbs

STORIES OF PRACTICE SUCCESS

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When it comes to herbs, acupuncturist Cathy Margolin wants her patients and customers to know she is the expert they need. In order to do this, Margolin has studied the marketplace and incorporated key business lessons to build an herbal company that sells and markets herbs to the masses who may be skeptics.

As an acupuncturist student, Margolin saw there was a need for marketing complicated herb formulas to customers who needed a simple cure. As she set out to form her own herb business, her instincts led her to a fulfilling career that is focused on TCM principles of healing. In her journey, Margolin has been able to learn a number of key strategies about building a business from scratch. She has also been able to make ancient herbs relevant in our modern society again.

Margolin shares her story of success with *Acupuncture Today* and gives some key tips for how others can follow in her footsteps.

AT: Tell us about going from an acupuncture graduate to being a successful business owner. What are some of the important steps you took?



Cathy Margolin

CM: As both a student and upon graduation, I found myself frustrated with patient's compliance and reactions to Chinese herbal formulas. I think we've all seen patients who take their herbs and heal much faster than those who neglect to take a prescribed formula. Acupuncture is incredibly effective but combined with herbs, I have always seen faster results. But, many American patients are afraid of the taste of raw herbs, don't like swallowing a handful of pills and won't continue taking them if they don't see nearly immediate results. I was looking for a way to adapt Chinese herbs to American tastes and lifestyles, even when I was still in school. Easy, convenient packets of herbs that taste good made sense to me but would Americans agree? I wasn't really sure but I started with a fundamental part of a healthy life: sleep. This is a problem for so many people and yet we all know when patients sleep well, their overall health improves much faster. Since Chinese herbs treat sleeplessness so effectively, starting with a sleep formula made sense to me and the iSleep Herb Pack was born. It was an immediate hit. At the beginning, my optimism helped me overcome the multitude of roadblocks that often can prevent new companies from gaining traction. Among the initial steps, I first visited potential suppliers in Mainland China and Taiwan. The

education I received from walking through Chinese herb manufacturers was an eye opener. I realized then that safety, quality and consistency would be the number one priority for my products. Packets will always be the way we identify ourselves. No pills, no capsules ever. That's what makes us so very different. Packets keep our herbs fresh and require no unnecessary fillers used in tablets and capsules. Packets have a very long shelf life, more than four years. I've been working at building the brand identity around packets the past couple of years. I have also sought to align with strong partners as I grow my brand.

AT: How did you get into your own herbal business? How has this business contributed to your overall success as practitioner?

CM: My entry into the herbal business began long before my formal education in the area. I had a fascination with and interest in plant/herbal medicine as early as I can remember. I would hunt for mushrooms in the forests as a kid and spent plenty of summers gardening with my father and grandmother. It's no accident that one of my first jobs was at a store called The Greenhouse, a huge nursery. My knowledge of plants and medicinal uses for them blossomed in my college years as I "experimented" with every kind of herbal concoction in the form of tinctures, poultices, herbal drinks and some homeopathy. When I finally began studying Traditional Chinese Medicine, I realized through the millennia of practical use the reason this medicine is still practiced today is because it works and its safety record is unmatched. TCM and Chinese herbs gave me a realization that we did not need to reinvent the wheel. It works perfectly when we know how to use it. After I completed the Master's program at Emperor's College and became a Licensed Acupuncturist in California and a Diplomat of Oriental Medicine, I had reached my goal. I had a license to practice TCM but, more importantly, a license to keep learning. The first thing I wanted to learn more about was herbal processing.

AT: When it came time to market yourself, how did you go about doing this?

CM: The means to elevate profile are both plentiful and challenging. From participating in trade shows to writing health articles and columns for publications, as well as creating an informative and interesting health blog, are a few of the ways I build awareness. Also, reaching out to media, not simply in the narrow focus of those already interested in acupuncture and holistic medicine, but to a broader category of media as well. This helps build brand recognition and spreads information to people not yet aware of the wide array of benefits available to them through Traditional Chinese Medicine, acupuncture etc. My book, *Stop Your Bitching ... Naturally! A Step-By-Step Guide to Balance Your Hormones and End PMS & Menstrual Cramps*, also generated significant attention to my company and my practice as well. I am also an active speaker on the topic of health and wellness. In media interviews, I try to share and spread an understanding of herbs and a healthy lifestyle and discuss the benefits of the Pacific Herbs products in those interviews.

AT: As an acupuncturist, what is the latest trend in your practice that you think is affecting the way acupuncturists do business these days?

CM: I see more acupuncturists working in medical offices than ever before and billing more insurance carriers today. Certainly, one of the best trends is more insurance providers are including acupuncture benefits. We are definitely seeing more acupuncturists in combined wellness settings with other health practitioners such as chiropractors, massage therapists and MDs. This is excellent trend toward main-streaming TCM. I also notice more acupuncturists selling herbal products and more dietary supplements, which fills a need for our patients and allows for additional streams of income. Having a few popular products on your shelves may cost a little money upfront but your patients will always appreciate the convenience and they respect our

recommendations for herbs and other supplements.

I see almost no acupuncturists who opt for a raw herb pharmacy in-house today. This is one trend that will no doubt continue. In the last few years, since cGMP rules and regulations have become stricter and time management is of the utmost importance, it simply doesn't make sense to stock raw herbs from an economical stand point. I tried it and it was a huge failure. Fortunately, for those of us who don't want to use a patent, we have many great prescription pharmacies to choose from that will make a raw or cooked custom formula. Overall, raw herbs are too time consuming and smelly for most folks so the trend is toward granules.

AT: You donate a portion of your sales to The Keep-A-Breast Foundation? Why was it important for you to give back?

CM: Giving back is important. I want to help women, not because they have helped me, but because they need help. Specifically, women have increasing incidences of breast cancer. Some don't realize it and there are ways both to minimize the risk and that early stage corrective action is so important. The Keep-A-Breast Foundation (KAB at www.Keep-A-Breast.com) works to educate women about healthy lifestyles choices and is not funded by pharmaceutical dollars. The statistics are staggering. Cancer.org says 1 in 8 women will develop invasive breast cancer and the American Cancer Society's 2013 estimate is that 232,340 new cases of invasive breast cancer will be diagnosed in women. I try to do my part in actively supporting and donating a portion of my sales.

AT: How have you been able to balance a side business and a practice?

CM: My business is not a side business; it's a full time effort. But, that said, I am not a juggler so sometimes it's difficult keeping so many balls in the air. I found that by focusing on the important elements, you can balance business, a practice and a family well, albeit with some difficulty at times. Viewing life in its totality rather than its components is sometimes helpful in that regard. Also, I try to simplifying things and delegate as much as possible. I set near-by goals with awareness of long-term objectives. I don't try to over-manage them, but generally throw my energy behind what works. As a result, I get to do what I love. Blessings come in many forms and working to turn them into actions is a full-time job.

AT: In your practice, what are the most common health issues you are seeing these days?

CM: Inflammation shows up in everyone, although slightly differently. I treat a lot of women with menopause complaints, this is very common. Generally speaking, about 90% of women of all ages I encounter have hormonal imbalances. I've been seeing this for years and as a result wrote my book, *Stop Your Bitching ... Naturally! The Step-by-Step Guide to Balance Your Hormones and End PMS & Menstrual Cramps*. This is required reading for most of my female patients.



AT: What are some of the Traditional Chinese Medicine principles you personally follow to achieve success?

CM: Balance in everything. Balance between work, play, exercise and rest. I practice *Qi Gong*, Tai Chi and yoga on a regular basis. I love to cook and eat well and try to enjoy the journey and the destination.

AT: As a business owner, what are some mistakes you made early on?

CM: In the early months, mistakes tend to arrive in quantity. So, that said, here's the lesson: keep moving forward despite the obstacles. Mistakes ranged from overestimating initial sales levels to underestimating the competition. In business you get what you pay for, so don't try to cut every corner. Focus on quality and sales will tend to gather through persistence. Customers are smart and want the lowest price and the best result. I try to deliver both but quality does come at a price. I have aligned with the finest herb suppliers.

AT: What do you think is the most important business lesson most acupuncturists need to learn to succeed in today's world?

CM: Successful practitioners should define themselves with marketing and seriously consider specializing. Marketing includes everything from your website to your office look and everything in between, including your community presence and social media presence. A defined focus on quality and detail will yield excellent results. I have only seven products yet all are defined for a very specific niche. Acupuncturists can work the same way, but pick just one or maybe two niches at most. You've got to do more than just treat pain, you need to specialize in something, i.e. women's health, fertility, weight loss, orthopedics, whatever is your forte.

AT: What has been the greatest and most important business lesson you have learned?

CM: You get what you focus on, so be careful to think only grand thoughts. When things are working well, continue working hard to keep them working well. When things are not working well, change your thoughts.

AT: What tips would you give seasoned acupuncturists still trying to find their niche?

CM: Don't try to find the niche, let it find you. Do what you do best and focus on your strengths. Appreciative clients will know you care for their wellbeing and give you their respect, business and loyalty. In turn, give your clients your best.

For more information go to www.PacHerbs.com.

Do you have a practice success story you would like to share? Email Senior Associate Editor, Brenda Duran at bduran@mpamedia.com.

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