

Facing the Pressures of the Digital World

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Everywhere you turn, practices are facing tremendous disruptive pressure to join the digital world. The real issue is how practitioners are dealing with this change. Transforming your practice from offline to online is a huge shift for most seasoned practitioners. For those in business prior to the Internet, the very way business was always done is now being called into question. Alternately, for those just starting out, most feel like they have a "leg up" because they have never known a world without the Internet. However, that doesn't necessarily mean they understand how to use it to market their practice. No matter where you are coming from, it's impossible to escape the pressure of operating your business in the digital world.

Many Moving Parts

A common scenario: the practitioner has an SEO (Search Engine Optimization) company performing online ads for a set of keywords as one program, a "web guy" is managing their website going in another direction, a millennial is managing their social media without supervision, an office manager or receptionist is organizing offline events (including printing flyers, postcards and print ads) and none of them are communicating with each other. No one is coordinating efforts or has any type of planned outcome. Sound familiar?

Some or all of this may be what you currently have successfully happening in your practice. You can't say for sure what is working, but your practice has new clients and existing clients and you're too busy to think about managing the marketing aspects of it all. In your mind, what helps you sleep at night is the thought of the the SEO Company Representative communicating weekly with your web guy. That millennial managing your social reputation knows what is offered on the website and is promoting the live upcoming event. Think of it this way, you have four people in a boat each rowing in a different direction, with bullhorns touting four different messages about your practice. And even though you are taking on new passengers, just as many might be exiting.

Work Smarter, Not Harder

This isn't meant to be doom and gloom. If we want to work smarter and not harder in 2016, then take a step back and evaluate what opportunities are being missed and think about how much more progress could be achieved when everyone is rowing in the same direction. If you are lacking customer referrals or have a difficult time with client retention, you need to start by evaluating the message behind the experience. That's not to say you need to modify how clients are receiving treatment, but rather what needs to be evaluated are the marketing expectations. Are the message, expectation and experience congruent in all forms of communication? I understand each client has a different set of physical issues and the forms of treatment might vary, but when that client refers a friend or family member, they are expecting the same results.

For example, let's say a potential client attends a live seminar educating them about stress and how they can benefit from your treatment. This new client books treatments, is seeing results, raves about the experience and refers a friend to your website to check out what you offer. But, the

message on your site doesn't talk about stress at all or very little. The website does a great job of describing how each person's treatment is "customized" or "special" and goes into great detail of what is going to happen on their first visit. And now the potential client is confused because they can't find what they are looking for. They see a completely different focus. Next, they go to your social media page and what they see there is post after post of treatment specials, the hours for availability and occasionally a post about why acupuncture is important, but nothing specifically about a process for dealing with stress. That friend begins to doubt if they have the right practice information. You can substitute whatever the condition is, but if you don't have the right message communicated on all digital and print formats, there is most likely confusion.

As a practitioner, heaven forbid you should try to get all the marketing folks listed previously to communicate with each other on their own. The new thinking says you have to start looking at the big picture from the first day and you have to consider the impact that these mixed messages have on your entire organization. Most of the time, one or two of these marketing arms are producing clients and as an owner, you assume they all are successful because you continually have new clients every month.

Flexibility is Key

As the captain of your vessel, have to have a clear plan and clarity for the future. You need a way to put your practice on course to deliver that vision. Innovative thinking needs to be integrated into every process and because everyone has time management considerations, everything needs a plan and a process.

Seat of pants management or continuously running from one fire to the next is exhausting and generally results in burn out or turn over. In this digital age, especially when it comes to social media, things are in a perpetual state of change. Some flexibility needs to be considered when thinking about logistical processes, however they don't necessarily disrupt the visioning process. Finding ways to help communication and the culture shock that rapid change brings is going to be just as important as the technology used to get it there.

The rate of change is accelerating dramatically due in large part by so much of society depending on digital notification, communications and connections.

Sometimes the speed of change is coming so quickly, and the requirements are so daunting, it is easy to get overwhelmed. It may require you and your organization to shift your mindset completely. This may mean being able to experiment and look at things with a different perspective as long as they meet Federal, state and local guidelines. Ultimately, it is your reputation and your wallet on the line. Those days of blindly trusting all messages are within regulations and letting everyone row in their own direction are a thing of the past. You are going to have to be a part of the marketing plan and involve all members of your organization (including those independent contractors) into the process.

Any type of mass marketing program tends to have less flexibility. In order to make that work with the rest of your marketing, you may need to get creative. Figure out the best way to keep what's working and incorporate with other parts that can be flexible for your existing and future clients, so they have a clear path to recommend others.

As creative thinkers and entrepreneurs, we have been attacking this type of change by throwing different technologies at it. Technology can certainly help, however, I caution that it requires a much more personal approach to organize and make sure all automated or systematic processes are still working together as efficiently as possible. One of the biggest problems is getting away

from thinking, "we do it this way because it's always been done this way." Or continuing to believe that, "this is the only way" of performing the action. By opening minds to more creative measures and seeing how it not only fits but makes life easier, should be your ultimate goal.

Most of the time, this is going to require communication, input and involvement with all parts of your organization. Even those who are thinking, "I'm a one person business," need to have a mind shift. Every component of your business, whether automated or not, requires human interaction and needs to be integrated and working together. It's not difficult to see the rate of change is happening quickly. The cool thing is that you recognize what part is holding you back and use this new knowledge to progress forward.

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