

FREE! How This Little Word Can Make You A Lot of Money Without Compromising Your Integrity

(YES, EVEN ACUPUNCTURISTS)

Honora Lee Wolfe, Dipl. Ac.

We're going to talk about a tried-and-true marketing technique: how to use the word *free* to generate increased office visits and profits. I know some of you will be immediately turned off and think that only cheesy businesses (e.g., used car dealerships and AOL) offer *free* stuff that really isn't free. But, please read this article with an open mind and remember that you are trying to grow your business with integrity and compassion. I'm trying to give you ideas on how to do that without spending a lot of money.

Now let's talk about the word free. In case you didn't know, free is the most powerful word in marketing and advertising. No other word captures as much attention or generates as much action. On the other hand, no word is as overused as free. Often customers become jaded when they find out that a free (whatever) is really worthless; nonexistent; based on unrealistic conditions; cheesy; stupid; or just plain not free after all. All that is often true, because no one can afford to give away a lot of stuff for free without going broke. So ... we're going to attempt to find ways to use free and make a favorable impression with our patients and potential patients ... and make them want to do more full price business with us and not go broke doing it. After all, any idiot can give stuff away for free or at a discounted price. It takes a skilled marketer, however, to properly use the "free" concept and still make a full profit where it counts.

To prove to you that free isn't just for slimy businesses and services, let's look at some examples of playing the "free" card and making it work ... right within our own profession.

1. Most of you have had the experience of going to an acupuncture convention or trade show. In fact, many people go to trade shows just to get the free samples the exhibitors give away! People will go home with a month's supply of needles by taking free samples from five different needle suppliers. Herb suppliers, too, will give out lots of samples of their products (even though five or 10 pills of an herbal product is, basically, clinically useless). Nonetheless, a number of needle and herb companies have built successful marketing strategies around giving away free samples. They would not show up at all the conferences and continue to do this if it did not work for them.
2. Memberships in our state and national associations often come with various free perks. Some offer low interest credit cards; discounts on malpractice insurance or inexpensive long distance service; various free items that have been donated by national suppliers of one sort or another; free travel agent services, AAA memberships, etc. I know we get "hit up" for all types of donations that are going to become perks for new members of various organizations. It makes for good advertising for both the companies and the organizations involved.
3. Practitioners in my state, when we were deeply involved in the passage of our first licensing bill, used free treatments as a political tool. It was our goal to give free treatments to all state

representatives within the six-month period before our bill came up for a vote. This was a type of free marketing used for political ends, and it allowed us to talk to each politician in person, in our own physical spaces.

So, you ask, how does any of this apply to me without being sleazy and cheesy? I can immediately think of a few ways that practitioners may play the free card to improve service and help get people in the door.

1. When every new patient comes in, give him or her a free book as part of the first treatment.

This involves finding books that can be understood by the average patient and including the book as part of the first treatment.¹ In other words, every new patient gets a free book to read as homework before his or her second appointment.

This will probably mean that you raise the price of your initial treatment by \$5-10 to cover the cost of the book, but your patient does not need to know how you organize your finances. Furthermore, since much of our patient population is usually interested in self-improvement and self-education, most will be very pleased that you have given them some "homework" to do, especially if the book is easy to read and understand. You have done two things when you give a patient a book to take home. First, you are helping to educate your patient about Chinese medicine, which allows him or her to understand what is happening during treatment. Second, you have demonstrated that you care about whether or not the patient does, in fact, understand something about the treatment. How many times do you think a Western practitioner suggests reading for his or her patients or tries to help them educate themselves, much less actually gives them a free book?

By giving away books to your patients, you have accomplished two important parts of marketing as it relates to acupuncture and Chinese medicine:

1. You are educating the public about acupuncture and Chinese medicine so that they are less fearful and skeptical.
2. You have helped to establish and foster personal trust with patients, because you have demonstrated that you want them to understand what is going on with their bodies and what their treatments are all about.

2. Use free reports, CDs, audio tapes or videos to market yourself to a specific niche market.

This involves creating something, either written or on a CD or tape, to give to a specific group of potential patients. For example, you can build an entire practice marketing to people with one disease or within one subculture (dancers, musicians, bicycle racers, etc.). Create a simple advertisement that says something like, "Do you suffer from fibromyalgia? Call for your free report on how you can feel better within days," or, "Musicians: Do you suffer from repetitive strain injuries? Call for your free CD on how to improve your performance and feel better fast." Include a phone number where they can call to request the free item, and nothing more. The free item then tells them all about what you can do for them with acupuncture, etc. This means you can accomplish two things:

1. Only people with the condition you want to treat (or who are part of the subculture you want to treat) will respond and ask for the free information. Thus, you have a preselected mailing list of people to whom you can market to directly over and over again, even if they don't go any further than asking for the information the first time. These folks may be in more discomfort later and may decide that they really do need your help.

2. Those who read the free materials and then call for an appointment or consultation do not have to be convinced that Chinese medicine is right for them ... at least, not as much. They have taken the step of getting in touch with you and are ready and willing and interested to hear what you have to say. Thus, one step of the education process is already done by the time you are actually talking to them on the phone, which makes your life easier.

3. Free consultations.

You may already be giving free initial consultations. It is a good idea, but I also suggest that you limit them to a very specific short amount of time that is understood by the potential patient. If you have a supply of articles, research, and brochures to hand them as you are shaking their hand and walking them to the door, that 10 or 15 minutes will go a lot further.

4. Free treatments for community fundraising events.

This is a tried-and-true method of getting your name out as someone who "participates" in the life and health of your community. There are endless opportunities here, and I don't think I need to go into great detail. When someone buys your treatments at auctions or other fundraisers, make sure he or she gets the same treatment as any other patient, and be sure to ask the patient for referrals of other people in the community that may benefit from your services.

5. The first bottle of herbal medicine is free.

I have heard of a few practitioners who do this. Again, it can be built into the cost of your appointment to cover the replacement value of the bottle. It is a kind gesture and is probably greatly appreciated by any new patient. It impresses them that you care about both their welfare and their pocketbook, and that you are willing to stand behind your medicine. This type of gift can even increase placebo effect, something we all must use to our advantage with every patient and in every situation.

I could go on with more free ideas, but I've given you enough free stuff in this article already. If you have an idea about how to use free to grow your practice, e-mail me at the address below and I'll be happy to discuss it with you.

Best wishes to you all for a successful private practice!

Reference

1. Blue Poppy has many books written for patients on a wide variety of subjects. These are inexpensive and most can be read in one night. Practitioners are able to buy these books at significant discounts in order to sell them or give them away in their practices.

MARCH 2003