

## We've Got Answers, Part 2

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This is part 2 in our series of common questions from students just about to graduate. [Part 1](#) appeared in the July issue.

Q: What three things are essential for a newly minted practitioner to have?

A: Web site: Unless you already have a community of patients to tap into or your target market does not use the Internet, most practices need a Web site. A Web site is only as good as its rating, however, so you need to optimize your Web site so that you pop up on the first page of Internet searches. A good Web designer can help you with this. You can even consider bartering treatment for Web design.

Business Cards: On your person, in your car and at your office. You never know when an extra stack will come in handy. When you hand someone your business card, consider handing them two and suggesting, "Here is an extra to pass along to someone who could benefit from acupuncture."

Contacts in your community: Networking is an essential part of ensuring success. Be known and noteworthy. If your clinic will be in a setting that already has a number of acupuncture practitioners, networking will allow you to meet people who can help you find your niche. On the other hand, if your clinic will be in an area where you are the first acupuncturist, you'll have a lot to do in terms of community education.

Q: What do you wish someone had told you when you were starting out?

A: Practice brings us into contact with all types of individuals. This brings richness to your practice, as well as an occasional challenge. Any unresolved issues that you have may certainly come up in the context of the clients that you see. The healthier and more balanced you are, the more equilibrium you'll bring to your work.

If you are working with other providers, be sure to have some kind of written agreement about the nature of the working relationship. Have clear boundaries and specific plans in place. Verbal agreements can result in misunderstandings that affect client care and your well-being.

Q: What strategies are most important for effective marketing?

A: Just as we take a holistic approach to the body, a greater marketing return will be achieved by embracing a strategic approach rather than accepting a one-size fits all approach. That means that an effective marketing strategy is individually defined for each target market. For example, the most important aspects in marketing our elder program will be very different from how we market our pediatric program.

If I would like to reach out to new mothers, I can brainstorm the sort of information they get from

pediatricians, midwives/doulas, day care centers and the Internet. When I ask a new mom specifically, she also tells me that there are various new mom message-board groups online and several local “Mommy and me” play groups. Therefore, if I know that I have \$500 to spend on this group, I am going to ensure that my Web site includes information specific for new moms and those keywords under which they might commonly search are included so my Web site pops up on the first page of search engines. I am going to spend half a day contacting all the day care centers to offer a free workshop for new parents on holistic self-care for baby and parents. The key here is to make sure the workshop is not just a sales pitch but is informative and teaches the participants some skills. For this group, my workshop would teach acupressure techniques for calming baby. I will also brainstorm through my contacts and networks to figure out who can introduce me to a key pediatrician with whom I can build a referral relationship. I join the online message-board groups and post info about a free workshop that I will host at my office.

If my target is elders, money spent on my Web site won’t have the same return, so I am going to focus my energies on networking with other professionals who also serve this population. I will call assisted living facilities to offer a free holistic workshop during which I will teach some simple *qi gong* exercises that can be done regardless of mobility challenges. I would also scan my networks and connections to figure out who can introduce me to a key geriatric physician with whom to build a relationship. I might also connect with a local agency that provides a weekly senior luncheon and offer free chair acupuncture once a month following that lunch.

Q: How can we succeed in the first year of practice?

A: The biggest mistake we see new practitioners making is underfunding their practice. To make an investment in its future, a new business needs financial resources. Consider a budget that provides for needed experts, like legal, accounting, Web optimization and a business coach, along with a marketing budget for advertising and promotional materials.

A month-to-month map will help you get where you plan to go, with little time spent lost along the way. Each month, you will continue to do what you started in previous months and then add an additional focus. Some ideas may include:

- Month One: Get all the logistics of your business worked out in advance such as a Web site, newsletter formatting, contact database, and promotional materials.
- Month Two: Start networking. Join the chamber of commerce, professional groups and online meetup groups. Get out there in the community attending events, supporting other people’s businesses, handing out buckets of business cards and making lots of new contacts. Follow up with these contacts with a “nice to meet you” note or an informational newsletter with healthy tips.
- Month Three: Set up speaking engagements. Find out all the support groups that happen at your local hospital or health center. Contact group leaders and set up free presentations with a minimum of two per month for next six months. Brainstorm other places that make sense, based upon your target groups. Beef up your presenting skills; join [Toastmasters](#) or use a business coach to practice. This muscle needs training, but everyone can build it and it will show quick results. Send out first newsletter.
- Month Four: Engage the press. Send out press releases, follow up with phone calls, write a few

articles for submission to local papers or online, and contact your local cable TV station for a guest spot.

- Month Five: Develop a team of strong patient referrers. Identify from your networks and contacts how to get personal introductions to physicians and other health professionals who will refer to you. Create a plan for building the relationship or seek a business coach to help with this.
- Month Six: Create a holiday marketing plan that includes incentive specials, a newsletter blitz, print ad campaigns and gift certificate promotion. Send out second newsletter.
- Month Seven: Review, revise and reinvigorate patient-retention plan. Track the referral sources listed on intake forms and review percentage of patients referred by word of mouth. If this number is under 60 percent, rethink your incentives for patients to refer and how you ask patients to share information about your practice. Assess your patient-retention rate (how many patients complete the full treatment plan, the average number of visits per patient, what percentage drop out before their third treatment). Set measurable goals for your next six months.
- Month Eight: Redo Month Two and set up speaking arrangements for the next six months. Revise your presentation based upon evaluations you have collected. Update your PowerPoint slides or handouts.
- Month Nine: Dance in the attitude of gratitude. Shower thanks on everyone who has been of assistance. Send thank you notes, make phone calls, reach out to contacts you made earlier in the year. Consider engaging in altruistic business-building efforts, like providing free acupuncture through a local chapter of [Acupuncturists Without Borders](#), at the homeless shelter or senior luncheons. Send out third newsletter.
- Month Ten: Plan your next community outreach activities based on what you've learned. Schedule an information table at a local health care agency.
- Month Eleven: Develop your strategic goals and objectives for year two using the SMART format (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Time-bound). Assess your successes and challenges over the last year. Focus on the process of self-reflection.
- Month Twelve: Plan your one-year party! Invite all the contacts you have made over the year, including patients, physicians, referrers and business owners. Have a creative draw for attendees (healthiest dish contest with a cash prize and local "celebrity tasters," or something for kids like a magician and face painting, or for young professionals perhaps some local music or a "taste of" local food).

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