

Perception is Important

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My first experience with acupuncture came from an accomplished professional. He had an acupuncture practice in an office he shared with a podiatrist. It looked like a typical medical office and he wore a white coat while treating patients. So, my first exposure to acupuncture left me believing it was as professional a career in the same league as engineering or being a physician. But once I started acupuncture college, I realized about half the students were from professional backgrounds; the rest had very little work experience or business background. I wanted to write something to help those new to business understand the need to be aware of your patients' perceptions.

I spent 17 years working in corporate America, and was privileged to receive training in how to work with people from various cultures, backgrounds, and beliefs. One of my instructors said you have seven seconds to make a great first impression on someone you meet for the first time. In seven seconds, that new person will determine whether you are someone they want to do business with or dismiss you as not worth their time. In seven seconds that potential patient/client will judge you based on your looks, your smile, your posture, your demeanor. Several of us voiced our frustration on how unfair that was, but the instructor pointed out, it didn't matter if we agreed with it or not, it still happened when two strangers meet for the first time. Have you put any thought into how your patients size you up in the first seven seconds they meet you? Do they see a confident caring professional? I would suggest spending some time and effort on improving your appearance and therefore your patients' first impression.

When I graduated in 2000 from Southwestern Acupuncture College in Albuquerque, New Mexico, I moved to Medford, Ore. to start my first acupuncture practice. I got right to work excitedly educating the community on Oriental Medicine and building my practice. One day I was searching for a radio station on my car radio when a local preacher's sermon caught my attention. The statement he made was "acupuncture is of the devil." I was shocked. Acupuncture is a medical modality, not a religion or spiritual path. Yet, in this modern community there was a prevalent perception that acupuncture was religiously affiliated. I came to realize if Oriental Medicine was going to be accepted by the general public in this community, it would be necessary to strengthen the perception that it is medicine without religious affiliations.

After visiting an acupuncturist's office in Ashland, Ore., I began to understand why people were uncomfortable with acupuncture in this area. Her office was in her tiny apartment, although state licensing requires commercial office space. When I walked in the place, it was poorly lighted and smelled of dust and mold. The furniture was worn and covered with a variety of velvet fringed shawls and covers. There were crystals on every available flat surface, and zodiac symbols on the walls. I felt like I had walked into a fortuneteller's tent. I try to keep an open mind, so I stayed and asked her questions about having a practice in Ashland. Her practice was struggling and she wasn't sure how much longer she could keep going. She didn't offer to treat me, thankfully, as I was not

comfortable disrobing and being needled in such an unclean environment. As uncomfortable as I was in this "office" how much more so a patient new to Oriental Medicine would feel. I'm sure she found the environment comfortable, but to a patient this decor could easily give the feeling of "the devil."

I recognized the importance of creating a treatment environment that would feel welcoming to new timid patients. I began looking at the perceptions the general public associate with medicine. The typical patient expects to enter a clean, professional office. The offices of MD's are often stark and sterile in the decor of the waiting area and especially in the treatment rooms. Yet the successful physicians' office, manage to also have items to help the waiting patients be comfortable, such as a television, toys for children, magazines to read, etc. I wanted to create an office space that would include all the clean, business decorum, yet be welcoming and more personable than the typical doctor's office. I found an office space with wood paneling on the walls, large windows in the treatment rooms that opened up on a private park, yet was located in a professional office park.

Cleanliness is more important than you may be aware. I have had a couple of new patients ask to use the restroom before they would fill out my intake forms. Then later confessed to me they were checking out how clean my restroom was, before they would let me treat them. Keep your office immaculately clean; set up a weekly cleaning schedule. It will help keep you and your patients from transmitting disease to each other as well as put your patients at ease.

When you first start your business, I encourage you to start your office with as little expenditures as possible. You can always upgrade later when your practice is bringing in more income, but spending too much initially can make or break your practice. For example, in my first practice I needed waiting room chairs. I used the dining-room chairs from a set I had at home. They were comfortable, looked professional, and I already had them. Later I replaced them with more medical-office-looking chairs.

Four years ago I began another acupuncture practice in Sutherlin, Ore., and once again began to realize there was a contingent of patients concerned that acupuncture would threaten their religious beliefs. Although my office has Oriental art work, I have chosen to eliminate the images of Buddha after noticing a couple of patient's reactions to them. New patients were visibly uncomfortable when viewing this religious icon. I had used it to add Oriental flavor to the office, but to some patients, it was equivalent to having a picture of Jesus on the wall, but representing a different religion. Although the image of Buddha had no religious affiliations to me, I needed to be considerate of my patients' perceptions, and create a neutral environment they could be comfortable within. I replaced the Buddha images with Oriental paintings of a dragonfly and bamboo forests (I framed images from a calendar that was a gift from one of the herbal production companies).

As acupuncturists, we need an office environment that puts patients at ease immediately. An office that says this is an "OK" place to be experiencing something new; basically, an immaculately clean space with personal touches like plants, pictures, and comfortable but professional looking waiting area; a familiar office arrangement, yet with more accessibility. Remember you have seven seconds to win over new patients and their friends.

SEPTEMBER 2012