



MARKETING / OFFICE / STAFF

Easy, Inexpensive Tools for a Successful Practice (I Promise)

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Successful practitioners are the ones who know how to run a business, first and foremost. I became a licensed acupuncturist in 2006. After having worked in chiropractor's offices for nine years, I opened my own office in 2015: four treatment rooms, a back office and a waiting room. Since then, methods in place, my income has increased five-fold. I've been able to employ another acupuncturist to treat overflow. Most importantly, I've watched other graduates benefit from my suggestions. TCM only becomes more popular as time marches on—there are practitioners I've watched thrive, simply by utilizing a few inexpensive marketing resources I've recommended.

While in school, many of us have a certain naiveté about work flow, thinking patients will just come. We have one practice management class where representatives sell us malpractice insurance, herbs, needles and other supplies. After passing our licensing exam, we're left to fend for ourselves. Having devoting four years and a considerable amount of money to understanding TCM, we realize upon graduation that we know nothing, the same way an anxious mother leaves the hospital with her first baby.

Drumming Up Business

After I'd exhausted my supply of friend-patients I trolled locally, offering incentives to neighbors. I did health fairs, set up in front of stores like Whole Foods, offered free consultations. I lectured at yoga studios. I mailed packets to doctor's offices, then followed up with doctor's offices. During this time, I felt considerable stress, which I hated bringing into my practice. My student loans went into deferment. I struggled to pay rent. I strove to provide the best care to my patients, trying not to see them as walking dollar-bills. I sought advice and was always told the same thing: don't go in network. Don't join ASH. Some providers told me it was the biggest mistake they'd made. Hold out, they said.

You'll regret it.

I spent years doing everything wrong, at least for someone in my position: devoted to learning TCM, figuring the rest would come as naturally as my commitment, someone with zero leads in the health care industry. Without knowing it, I'd embarked on the business of learning to run my own business. If you find yourself in the same position, just know that what took me years to figure out I'll share right now.

If you're insecure about paying rent, chiropractors will usually offer a 50/50 split, which works well if you've got an empty schedule. Make sure you have two treatment rooms to see patients on the half hour, it's the only way you'll support yourself—the busiest and most well-known practitioners see more than one patient per hour.

Priorities: #1 is Your Website

While you're looking for that space (rent or split), get your website up. Create business cards and brochures. Find scholarly articles related to acupuncture in your particular specialization, like sports medicine. Download them to your website or provide a link. This should be something that has been published in an arena with a western medical bent, something newsworthy on a major network or respected website. Your patients may not understand articles that are too technical, but they will value that it was referenced on CNN, or printed in a well-respected journal. Make sure you follow the appropriate protocol for publishing rights.

Office Ally offers a free practice management cloud-based software. It's sometimes slow, and quirky, but it's free. I'm not an expert on software but I think it can run you about \$500/month.

If you are graduating as I did, without any connections to doctors, lawyers, midwives, etc., it's crucial you take insurance. Don't listen to anyone who says otherwise, it's bad advice. Where do you think your patients will come from? The next step that worked for me was getting an insurance biller. Anyone can electronically submit claims to insurance companies, but when there's a problem, it can take a lot of work to get paid. That's what your insurance biller is there for, to work on the tough cases. They make a percentage of the payment, so they don't get paid if you don't get paid.

Also, you'll pay more, but your insurance biller should verify patient's benefits. If your insurance biller is just submitting claims, you can do that yourself. You sometimes won't get paid when the insurance company screws something up, but in terms of time management, you're better off letting it go.

Your Reviews

In today's world, reviews are important. This is how new patients find you. The bulk of your patients will go to their insurer's website for a list of names, and there will be tons. So they'll look for trustworthy reviews online (Yelp, Google). I believe you can even be rated directly on some insurance websites. At least 60 percent of my patients have found me from reviews. And this is a great chance for you to make sure you are kind and considerate to every patient that walks in your door. Yelp encourages you not ask for reviews, but let the process happen organically. Although most people use reviews to find services, very few write them. A little encouragement goes a long way. Do not get fake reviews. I've done a few seminars that said if Yelp finds out, they will plaster it all over your page and you'll lose your credibility.



Phone Service is a Must

And finally, my most important tool. This is something I've discussed with close to a hundred people, and if you operate the same way everyone else does in this busy world, you'll know it's true. Have someone answer your phone. This is critical. If you expect patients to leave a message and wait for you to call them back, they won't. They'll hang up and go to the next person on their list.

This is a potential patient that could be with you for years, refer their friends, their spouse. If you want to earn the kind of money that will support your family, you will never do so if you don't have someone answering your phone. Not one of those services that just takes messages and offers no information about your practice. You want someone who can answer the phone and say, " _____ Acupuncture, how may I help you?"

Someone who can schedule appointments on your scheduling software. Someone who can answer questions about how much services cost, what you specialize in. Where to park. Someone who can take the patient's insurance information and forward it to your insurance biller. Someone who can do reminder calls/texts. Someone who fulfills all the duties of a full-time receptionist. When I starting paying someone to answer my phone, my practice exploded. I caught all those calls that had previously been hang-ups because I was too busy doing acupuncture to answer my phone.

But what do you do if you can't afford to spend \$35,000/year minimum on a receptionist? I hired a company that provides this kind of service, an operator who knew the specifics of my practice and could answer my work phone from home. It surprises new patients when she's not in the office because she knows my practice so well. Once you start utilizing these suggestions, if you don't answer that phone, they won't work for you.

And that's really everything I did to increase my salary five-fold in two years. Don't waste your money on marketing schemes, Facebook posts, social media. Most people will not search for a medical professional through advertising because it implies you need to spend money on ads to get patients. It's something you can add later, but it won't pan out when you're just trying to pay off your student loans. Good luck and I wish you and your patients success and good health.

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