

TODAY'S PRIVATE PRACTICE

The Eight Steps to Developing a Thriving Private Practice

To organize your efforts, you may find the following eight-step process useful:

1. Find a Niche

There are many advantages to focusing your practice on a niche or set of niches. Specialties attract more clients than a general practice. So, how do you decide on a niche?

To start with, look for the convergence of three factors:

- 1) What do you love to do? What type of clients, services or work do you thrive on the most? What are you passionate about?
- 2) What you are best at? Where do your talents lie? What do you have the potential to become the best at in your locale or region? What are your favorite skills?
- 3) What is lucrative? Will people pay for this service? Is there potential to have well-paying clients for this?

When you find a niche service that taps into these three factors, you have a potentially good niche. Does that stimulate any ideas? Ideally, you will find an underserved area that will continue to grow. For example, in my area, there are a shortage of play therapists. Do some market research. Look in the media. What are the urgent concerns and felt needs that people have?

Your personal and professional experiences may give you some good ideas. Colleagues may also be a good source of ideas. What are they talking about in the way of innovative psychological services?

2. Discover the Niche Markets' Problems

What are the felt needs, which are not always the same as real needs, of the niche group? How can you find out? Do some market research. Review literature on this target group. What are articles in relevant publications discussing? Read publications that people in this niche market read.

One of the best ways to do this research is to sit down over lunch with an individual in your niche market and interview him/her. While you are at it, you can also test market some of the ideas you have for services and programs you might offer to see what kind of reaction you get. Another way might be to conduct a poll, forum or focus group. Survey the needs of your niche. Know your target market.

3. Develop Solutions

How can you help meet the felt needs and address the urgent concerns of your niche market? Decide on a service or set of services you can offer that will help the niche market with its challenges in an effective way. To get ideas for this service, research the literature on what may be an effective treatment. Obtain training and supervision as needed. Are there any programs or approaches that you can adapt?

Think in terms of a range of services for the niche market: counseling/therapy, workshops, groups, consultation and coaching.

4. Design Packaging

Packaging is important. After you have identified a solution for your niche market's felt needs, I suggest you develop it into a step-by-step program.

Have a process that you deliver. Let your prospective clients know you have a plan and a process to help them. This gives you more credibility and the potential client hope that it will be beneficial. The process description answers the questions about how you help people and what you would do with them in therapy. Delineate the steps of your process in a way that leads a person to say, "I want that."

There are several other advantages to this. One is the way this will crystallize your thinking. You will also become much more articulate in describing the features and benefits of your services.

Now you have a marketable service to add to your service line.

- Pick a niche market
- Identify a specific problem that the niche market experiences
- Develop a program to deliver your solution

5. Develop a Marketing Plan

Consumers do not know you or what you do unless you communicate that to them. Develop a plan to let people know what you do, how you can help them and how they can contact you. For each service in your repertoire, write a marketing plan.

How will you fill your reservoir of contacts and attract people to your practice? To whom will you market this service? What strategies will you use? What tools do you need to develop?

A basic marketing plan will outline each service in your service line, each service's target market and several strategies to promote your service to the target group. How will you establish yourself as an expert in this area? Develop, disseminate and repeat your message to each target market. How will you create opportunities to interact with your referral sources and prospective clients?

Create an agenda of actions, and you have the beginning of a marketing plan.

6. Implement Marketing

This is sometimes more challenging than it sounds. Besides the challenge of initial inertia, there is the challenge of getting good and comfortable with articulating your services in a way that will connect with your target market. I find that many mental health professionals are not great at articulating their services in laymen's terms. So, consider how you can develop your skills in doing this.

One helpful exercise would be to write out a 30-second commercial or description about the service and get feedback on it. Once you have a good one, practice it until it's natural. Marketing skills and execution get better with time, experience and practice.

To get the word out about you, become a good communicator so people can understand the impact that your services can offer. A business coach can be very beneficial with this step as well as the other seven. Your task is to develop a referral engine. Build a self-generating engine that keeps going easily and yields a steady flow of referrals.

You might do this by some or all of the following:

- Schedule a networking lunch with different referral sources each month.
- Give free talks to organizations.
- Send out a mailing every month or every quarter to your mailing list of past clients, referral sources and others.
- Get out of the office and meet people. Expand your mailing list by 10 names each month.

To work out a plan for marketing, you will need to set aside some time on a weekly basis. To be successful, you will have to make marketing a priority and consistently engage in the most strategic activities.

7. Create a Follow-Up System

For those who do not initially accept your services, have a follow-up system in place. The goal of marketing is to get prospective clients or referral sources to know, like and trust you. This usually takes multiple exposures to you over time. A follow-up system makes sure you keep in contact with valuable referral sources and prospects and exposes them to you over and over.

Examples of elements in a follow-up system include a periodic newsletter, a database of contacts, periodic coffee or lunch appointments with referral sources and appearances at venues where these people circulate. In addition, you can mail a brochure about each of your services to the target groups of each service.

You will, in time, accumulate a valuable mailing or e-mailing list and referral sources. You will find each time you mail out the periodic newsletter or brochures, your phone starts ringing in the coming weeks with referrals as people are reminded of your services.

8. Keep it Going and Growing

Some suggestions to keep things going and growing:

- Maintain balance in your life and good self-care.
- Be persistent and persevere.
- Find support in friends, colleagues and referral partners.
- Develop and maintain good business systems. Automate things as much as possible. Invest in a good computer, software and telephone system.
- Maintain quality services.
- Provide excellent customer service.