Points to Ponder for the Acupuncturist in Business

By Bonnie Koenig, LAc
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Introduction

I’ve been an acupuncturist since 1999. I spend a lot of time online as well. That means when practitioners are complaining about running their own business and the difficulties of doing so, I’m reading about it. They might be worrying about the costs of starting up, the costs of staying in business, paying taxes, or the hassles of hiring an employee. If each of these things has a certain amount of fear attached, it is because these decisions make up our lives. The tax penalties and the financial repercussions can be huge. As health care practitioners, most of us aren’t also business minded so that makes these decisions even more difficult.

As acupuncturists, we think about healing and helping people. It’s easy to want to help so much that we don’t want to think about taking money. But money is what allows all of us to continue to practice the medicine that we fell in love with. It also lets
us put food on the table and take care of our own needs.

The *acupuncture business person* knows that they can’t serve their patients if there’s no money coming in. The business has to feed them as well as work for the patient. Money isn’t a bad thing. People will pay for what they value and acupuncture is a valuable service. How much to charge depends upon the business model, but it has to be enough to let the acupuncture business person eat.

One has to balance personal needs with the need to be of service during the early years of getting a business started. The business itself might cost money. It’s easy to think about cutting corners, but sometimes those cuts are obvious to potential patients. They might worry that if the practitioner doesn’t care about their business, how can the practitioner care about them? Worse, they may wonder what other corners have been cut.

I didn’t start out as a business person nor did I get these ideas fully formed. I’m not sure I ever got them as an acupuncturist. I have thought much more about a business plan and a business timeline as a writer and publisher than I ever did as an acupuncturist. Some of that was because I had time to think about a business plan for writing and publishing.
With acupuncture, it seemed like one day I was looking into schools and the next I had quit my job and started studying. After that, I was overwhelmed. I’d worked for small businesses before so I had some background. I was fortunate that one of my jobs included bookkeeping, so I understood finances. Marketing, for a shy person like me, was really a struggle. I also struggled getting basic structures in place, all done after graduation, and after I had to rely on this business that had no real plan for my own livelihood.

Looking back, I’m not sure when I would have done the work of planning my acupuncture business. Maybe before school? I certainly didn’t have much time during school, but I probably did have time here and there. Smart students should be thinking about their business. Still, hindsight is great, isn’t it?

As a writer, I can read about other writers and their business struggles. I can evaluate what has worked for them based on what I want to do and where I want to go. It might even shape how I define what success means to me. I read everything Kristine Kathryn Rusch (check her out at http://www.kriswrites.com and consider her book Freelancer’s Survival Guide, where much of the information on making a living can be applied to any business owner, not
just a freelancer) writes about business. I do so because way back in the early 1990s I saw her at OryCon. She was the new editor of the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. She sat on a panel and cut through a lot of mystery about what editors purchase. They purchase what they like from people they know. The way editors get to know writers (back in the early 1990s before there was the internet and Facebook) was through stories the writer submitted. They purchased stories from writers they had turned down before (unless the story was really fantastic). It made sense when Rusch spelled it out. It never would have occurred to me to think like that before she said those things.

Rusch’s business writing keeps pointing out the blatantly obvious that everyone overlooks. Everyone else overlooks those things because people who have succeeded take certain premises for granted. For the new business person, the number of tasks required to start a business can be so overwhelming that it can be hard to remember to breathe, much less apply common sense.

I see a number of mistakes, most of which I made as a practitioner, when newer practitioners start asking questions. My ideas aren’t new and can be traced back to a number of business bloggers who say many of the same
things in different ways. These are things I wish I had thought about before going into the acupuncture business.

What you do with the information is up to you. After all, there are many paths to a successful business. However, keep these ideas in mind. Reject them only when you have a solid, logical reason to do so and another plan in mind. That, more than anything else will help you define your business as yours and lead you on a path to success.
Your Business Name

The savvy business person knows the important of a business name that is easy to remember.

Lisa Hanfileti tells the story of her business name, Points of Origin, on her site Insights-for-Acupuncturists.com. It’s a cautionary tale full of a great many potential pitfalls in choosing a name. Lisa says so many of her classmates loved the name ‘Points of Origin’. It means something to an acupuncturist. Unfortunately it meant nothing at all to potential patients. It was only when they added the word acupuncture that patients understood what the clinic was about.

Further, there was the matter of the abbreviation. It’s common in writing to shorten your business name to the initials. Points of Origin shortens to POO. That wasn’t exactly how Lisa wanted to be remembered. We all make mistakes. Some are worse than others. The great thing about Points of Origin is that it’s easy to spell and remember, even
when potential patients don’t understand what it’s referring to. Those who ask get a great explanation about the name and it will remind them of Lisa’s goals for her patients.

There are a number of people who choose names based on pinyin words that mean something. While this is another one of those great ideas that potentially all fellow students love, these names suffer the same issue Lisa had with Points of Origin. The average person doesn’t know what the words mean. In addition, the average person can easily misspell the pinyin words, meaning they might not find you online.

Using your own name coupled with acupuncture is great, unless you grow large enough to take on associates. Using the name of your location might be okay, but what happens if you move?

There are many great names that are reflective of the type of healing that acupuncture does. Get one that will appeal to the clients you want to attract and is easy to remember. Your business name is the first contact that most people will have with your brand. Make it good.
Points to Ponder:

1) Will you ever want to employ someone else as an associate? If so, get a clinic name that is not just your name plus the word acupuncturist.

2) Will you move? Consider how far you might move. For instance, if you choose the name of your city, moving within the city is great and the name is still appropriate. If you have the name of the street you are on (as my veterinarian did), moving off that street might make the name a little silly and clients may mistakenly believe you are in a different location than you are. Can you take the name of a region?

3) Can people pronounce and spell the name?

4) Is your potential name memorable?
For Further Investigation:

Insights for Acupuncturists at http://www.insights-for-acupuncturists.com

How to Name a Business at https://www.sba.gov/content/how-name-business

8 Mistakes to Avoid when Naming Your Business http://www.entrepreneur.com/article/76958

How to Choose the Best Name for Your Business http://www.forbes.com/sites/sage/2014/03/10/how-to-choose-a-name-for-your-company/
Who are you?

The savvy business person starts thinking about what makes them unique in their field even before opening their business

No one is just an acupuncturist. Everyone brings something unique to the business. The reason you want to consider what you bring to the business before you even open is that your unique skill set will influence your brand. It could go so far as to influence your clinic name. You want to have ideas about your personal brand so that you can plan marketing materials like your business cards and website using these elements.

You might start writing down your ideal patient and how your ideal treatment unfolds. Do you use herbs? Not everyone does. Do you do a lot of body work? Not everyone does. Do you have other special skills? Are you drawn to a very purist view of acupuncture or do you also incorporate Western medical information as well? These
are all unique ways of working with people. What is yours?

You get information like this from knowing yourself. It may offer ideas about the type of business you hope to be running in five years. If you know you’re the sort of person who wants to learn all you can about specific things, you might end up specializing at some point. Even if you aren’t sure what you hope to specialize in, knowing your inclinations lets you look for an opportunity to play to your strength, which might be a specialty.

Maybe you know you want to work with people who have a specific illness right away. You can plan to develop your knowledge around that subject as deeply as you can. In the long term you might consider whether you’d like to write a book, teach, or just have a thriving clinic that specializes in this particular problem.

Some people want to help as many people as possible, all on their own. There are those who know they don’t want to run large clinics. They want to focus on one patient at a time. Finally, there are those who hope to have a large clinic, either with many acupuncturists or an integrative clinic bringing a variety of modalities together. The person who considers an integrative clinic will want a business name
that doesn’t specify acupuncture so that all modalities are represented. Maybe words like “natural healing” will resonate better.

It’s easy to think you are just another acupuncturist. However, everyone brings something unique to the table. For some people, it’s a specific background like having been a physical therapist or a nurse. For others it’s the ability they have to connect with people. Other people have talents that center around business, so they might be able to create a large thriving clinic with multiple practitioners and modalities.
Points to Ponder:

1) Consider your ideal working situation.

2) Consider your personal working strengths and weaknesses. If you’ve ever been a boss and hated it, you may not be a candidate for a large clinic, unless you find the right office manager who can do hiring and manage the day to day headaches of having multiple employees.

3) If you feel really unsure or like you really have nothing special to bring to your business, a business coach can be very helpful in this area.
For Further Investigation:

Heart of Business Coaching http://www.heartofbusiness.com (also has a blog and free resources)

A Business Plan

The savvy business person has some sort of business plan, even if it is not the detailed plan that might be required for a bank. They know, generally, where they want to be in 5 years, 10 years and perhaps even beyond.

When I was in school, no one suggested writing a business plan. While writing a traditional business plan may be more than you need to do, even a general outline of what you hope to accomplish in your business can be helpful. If you are opening a clinic that requires start-up money, then you definitely need a more traditional business plan. Places like SCORE (Service Corporation of Retired Executives) are a big help if you’ve never had to write one.

Even without the traditional trappings of a complete plan, every business person should know what they are selling, who they are selling it to and the size of their potential
market. They should know where they hope to be in five years and even ten years.

You have to know what your product is. It’s not just doing acupuncture. You are selling your time and expertise. That means you might sell acupuncture and herbs or just acupuncture alone. You might sell your knowledge of nutrition, either one on one with patients or in a group.

An acupuncturist who is also a yoga teacher, for instance, might decide to offer yoga classes to all her patients with a specific injury. It doesn’t have to be on the list of things that go on the menu when you open, but knowing you have those skills and how you can package those skills is important.

You also need to know who you are selling your product to. I loved working with people who had chronic issues. I was particularly fond of my chronic fatigue/fibromyalgia women. The women with that constellation of issues always seemed to understand the mind/body connection in a way that many of my other patients didn’t. My specific group of people might have been women between the ages of 20 and 65 who were suffering from long term fatigue and pain and were tired of feeling as if no one understood them or could help them.

Having clarified my ideal patient, I
could find census information about women in those age groups. I might find out from local support groups how many people had fibromyalgia or chronic fatigue in my area. This information would give me a ballpark figure for my business plan. Notice I wasn’t that specific. After all, there are many types of chronic pain and other types of fatigue (perhaps side effects of pain medication) that might plague women so I could be comfortably generous in my ballpark figure.

If you need help finding your target market, I highly recommend Mark Silver’s *Heart of Business*. He can assist a new practitioner focus on the people they most want to help. Even if you think you don’t want to specialize, then consider your general market. Are you serving low income patients? Do you really like working with those patients who have a lot of needs? Everyone has a favorite patient. Who is that person and where do you find others like them?

Once you find your ideal patient, think about your goals. How busy do you hope to be in the first year? Is that realistic? What steps do you need to take to get there? The more specific your figures, the better you’ll be able to target where you want to be and know if you’re on track to get there. Five year and ten year goals are a bit out there but
having something to shoot for is important.

Many business owners have a five year plan they update every year. They track what they did the last year, what seemed to work best, where they were successful and where they were less successful. They also re-evaluate their goals. Is the five year goal still worth pursuing or should they refine their course? Maybe they had hoped to just be seeing one patient an hour for 30 hours a week in five years but now that they are busier, they realize they would rather see two patients an hour but only see patients 20 hours a week.

Stay in touch with the things that are most important to you. If you need to, refine your target market. See how your brand reflects you within that target. Maybe you thought you wanted to specialize in women’s health but find that you work really well with athletes training for marathons. Your business name is the Pink Porcupine. This may not exactly appeal to runners, particularly men, so you might need to redefine your brand. Such changes are rarely that extreme but it’s important to look at who you are focused on and see how they might perceive your office, your style and your marketing materials.
Points to Ponder:

1) You can’t always know your market ahead of time. Consider the types of people you are most drawn to. What do they have in common? Can you create an ideal patient based on that? Or maybe you had a favorite patient in the clinic at school. What about that patient appealed to you? Focus on that.

2) Long term plans were made to be refined. They are goals. If you’re not on track to reach them after a year, you might have to consider a course correction. Or maybe you were just optimistic. Be very honest when re-evaluating.

3) What you love about the work can change. Someone who loved having a small private practice business model may decide a few years down the road that they are really interested in being busier. Someone who thought they would never want to be a boss may find that they really want to take that challenge on.
For Further Investigation:

How to Write a Business Plan https://www.sba.gov/writing-business-plan


The Secrets to Writing a Successful Business Plan http://www.amazon.com/Secrets-Writing-Successful-Business-Step--ebook/dp/B00I6S87LW/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1416426485&sr=8-1&keywords=Business+Plan

The Business Plan Kit for Dummies http://www.amazon.com/Business-Plans-Dummies-Steven-Peterson-ebook/dp/B00EFB463C/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1416426485&sr=8-3&keywords=Business+Plan (I have always been surprised at how much information can be packed into a “Dummies guide” although I confess to not having read this one.)
Selling your Time

The savvy business person understands that what keeps them in business is a product.

Every service you offer is a product. Acupuncturists want to be helpful but you have to think of your time as your product. You might spend time with one person an hour or many people an hour. You might do acupuncture, educate, create formulas, or do massage in that time. Depending upon your background, you might have other skills to add to that.

Acupuncture is a service. That means that you have to be available before people can purchase that “product”. That means they are buying your time, one on one. The more time you spend with a person one on one, the more you have to charge for your overhead. It’s helpful to think in terms of leveraging your time. This simply means that you learn how to create more time slots for yourself by writing a book, creating a webinar, having classes in your clinic or maybe hiring on another practitioner. All of these practices allow you to
be available to more people that you could be available to one on one.

One practitioner I know has a room she rents to a massage therapist three days a week. One afternoon, she uses that room herself. She has a Biomat and people can come in and lie on it, letting her utilize that room without creating more work than she’s ready to do at this point.

Always focus on products you can create to get your target market into your office. Whether it’s offering books to people with a certain health condition or classes on managing stress or some other condition, this type of product gets people into the office. Some of these can lead to additional sales and another stream of income.
Points to Ponder:

1) You don’t have to sell all your products separately in terms of billing. However, knowing you have a variety of techniques and skills can help you focus on new streams of income when times get slow.

2) Sometimes a unique skill can become a specific product through a book, a workshop or an online class. If you are also a yoga teacher, maybe you do an online class about the exercises you use to help people with back pain.

3) List your own skills so you can see them written out. During slow times, you may want to consider if you have anything that can be packaged in ways that will bring in new patients or if it can be packaged into something that creates a separate stream of income, like a book or a class.
For Further Investigation:

Heart of Business http://www.heartofbusiness.com

Making Acupuncture Pay http://www.makingacupuncturepay.com

Building Your Ideal Private Practice http://www.amazon.com/Building-Your-Ideal-Private-Practice/dp/0393703312/ref=la_B001ILFOW4_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1416427516&sr=1-1

Book Yourself Solid http://www.bookyourselfsolid.com/

Making Your Service Easier to Sell http://www.entrepreneur.com/article/159488

How to Sell a Service http://www.smalltownmarketing.com/selling_services.html
Profit and Loss

The savvy business person understands the concepts of profit and loss.

Knowing and understanding whether or not your business is profitable seems like a no brainer. A lot of people don’t really know how to calculate what they spend on their business and the money they take in. They don’t know how to figure taxes or rent. Items like needles, where costs may vary from order to order may feel even more difficult to calculate.

Learn to understand accounting or hire someone to help with this. There are a lot of great programs out there to help people track their costs and their income. For those who don’t feel they can hire an accountant or bookkeeper, there are classes both online and off. This can be invaluable in being able to track how you and your business are actually doing.

Being able to track your time, not just time spent with patients, but the time you are marketing, doing billing and cleaning can be
very helpful. This lets you know how much
time you are focusing on your business. If
you break this down weekly, you’ll know how
much you are making per hour.

As your business grows, you might
see that you are spending ten hours a week
cleaning. You know from talking to others that
a good cleaning person can clean the office in
two hours. This might free up another eight
or nine hours for you (chances are there will
be minor cleaning that you still need to do)
to do other things. Further, you are no longer
figuring in that eight or nine hours of work
into your hourly pay. You might find that that
new expense allows you to feel as if you are
actually making more money for less work.

Paying someone else to free up your
own time can be used for other chores like
bookkeeping, billing and taking care of your
website. In today’s world you can hire a virtual
receptionist to do many administrative tasks,
from answering the phone to re-writing an
office manual. Using an online scheduler
can make the day flow faster as patients
schedule their appointments on their own
time. A virtual assistant or utilizing an online
scheduler may not be as expensive as hiring
an employee but still frees up your time to
do other things, like treating patients and
marketing your practice in ways that you
really enjoy. Remember, the main thing a service provider sells is their time. Don’t waste it on tasks that are neither enjoyable nor income generating.

On the other hand, knowing and understanding your costs and income can help prevent you from overspending when it’s too soon to start hiring people to take over some hated tasks. Getting help is a great thing but first you need to have a plan in place so you can pay for the assistance.
Points to Ponder:

1) When you talk about how much you make in your business, do you figure that per hour, per patient or per month? How much time are you really working if you base your income on how much you make per patient?

2) Are there tasks that a specialist, like a bookkeeper or webmaster, can do for you and save you time, which in the long run may save you money?
For Further Investigation:

Accounting Made Simple http://www.amazon.com/Accounting-Made-Simple-Explained-Pages/dp/0981454224/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1416427578&sr=1-3&keywords=accounting+for+dummies

The Accounting Game http://www.amazon.com/Accounting-Game-Basic-Fresh-Lemonade/dp/1402211864/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1416427604&sr=1-3&keywords=basic+accounting&pebp=1416427609065
Getting a Raise

The savvy business person works to make their hourly wage higher on a regular basis so that they can give themselves regular raises. This may mean learning how to more effectively leverage their time.

Costs of living rise. It’s a fact of life. That’s one reason regular workers get raises. I’m not here to argue the idea that wages have been stagnating, but, in general, the goal of most workers is to make enough money to keep up with expenses. To run a successful business, you’ll want to be sure you can offer raises to yourself and to any employees you may have hired.

The first thing small business owners, particularly service providers, think of when thinking of giving themselves a raise is that they’ll be raising their prices. This is one option. During the course of an acupuncture career, chances are you will increase prices, but that’s not the only way to raise your income.

Seeing more patients is another
option. For practitioners who have maxed out their available time and space, they may consider moving to a space where they can have more treatment rooms to see more patients each hour. If they don’t want to increase their patient load, they’ll need to be a little more creative.

An acupuncturist who teaches yoga within their clinic space may begin offering more classes. This will generate money from more than one patient per hour. It will also create more exposure as the price of a yoga class may not be as much as an acupuncture session. Further, people interested in yoga may not have any health conditions that they think need treatment, but should they crop up, they now have a contact with someone who does acupuncture.

Additionally, the acupuncturist/yoga teacher might record the yoga classes, particularly if the practitioner is working with patients who all have the same condition. The practitioner can then sell the video class on her website or through one of the teaching sites so other people can utilize them in their home. Maybe the practitioner writes up a workbook that will help her patients track their progress, which she then sells in her clinic. Of course, the acupuncturist and yoga teacher needs to have gotten waivers from the
Another practitioner might become a specialist. This acupuncturist might teach an online class in that specialty. They might write a book about it. This kind of leveraging works a bit differently than that of the acupuncturist teaching yoga. A yoga class is something patients can do in addition to being seen by the acupuncturist for treatment. A specialist wants to reach more people with a specific problem. They may be targeting other acupuncture practitioners around the world with their added classes and books. They aren’t hoping that these people will become patients. Instead they are just hoping to share their knowledge with a wider audience.

Yet another practitioner may decide to expand their practice. This acupuncturist gets a larger space, hires an associate and pays the associate an hourly wage. Two acupuncturists see more people per hour than one. As the business owner, the acupuncturist is being paid for the work of the associate. The associate is being paid by the business owner, but they are not paid as much as the business owner takes in. Expenses may have gone up, but so has the income.

Remember that your time is your product. Leveraging your time means finding ways to offer your expertise to more people
through classes, workshops or books. Another way of leveraging is to expand the hours in a day. That means seeing two people an hour or three or four. If you want to focus on one or two people an hour, then hiring another person to see patients three and four allows you to take in more income than you are paying the employee and leverage your time that way.
Points to Ponder:

1) Your cost of living will increase. How will you make sure your business continues to increase the income it takes in?

2) Are there ways you can leverage your time by hiring someone else, seeing more patients yourself, writing a book, or creating a class?

3) You don’t have to increase your profitability every year, but you should have a general upward trend.

4) Part of your profitability will be how much you charge for your services. Don’t be afraid to raise your prices on a regular basis, whether it’s annually or every two or three years. How often depends upon your local market.
For Further Investigation:

Heart of Business http://www.heartofbusiness.com

Points for Profit http://www.amazon.com/Points-Profit-Essential-Practice-Acupuncturists/dp/189184525X

Building Your Ideal Private Practice http://www.amazon.com/Building-Your-Ideal-Private-Practice/dp/0393703312/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1416427944&sr=1-1&keywords=building+your+ideal+private+practice&pecp=1416427944988

The Million Dollar Private Practice http://www.amazon.com/Million-Dollar-Private-Practice-Difference/dp/0470635789/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1416427944&sr=1-3&keywords=building+your+ideal+private+practice
Your Brand

The savvy business person understands that the customer experience of their business is their brand and strives to make the customer love their experience.

Branding is one of the large topics that many people have a hard time understanding. Often they think that a small business doesn’t have to worry about branding. Or they think branding is limited to their logo.

Branding is the entire experience a customer has with the business, from the initial impression, which could be the logo, to their last interaction which may be with the practitioner, a receptionist, or even the biller. Yes, that’s right, the insurance biller may be your patient’s last experience with your clinic.

Your office is part of your brand. The sounds and smells in your office create part of the patient experience. The way the door opens into your clinic and the first sight of the office is part of your brand. If you are late all the time, then that becomes part of
your brand. How you dress, and how your employees dress, are all part of your brand.

Naturally there is no “perfect brand”. A good brand understands that all these subtle things play a role in the customer experience. Many of these little things will factor in how often a patient refers out. A name that is difficult to remember, parking that is hard to find, or phone messages that go unanswered are all things that can decrease the clout of your brand.

The target market must love what the business does. They must be drawn to the logo, the colors and the location. Further, the target market must feel good in the office. If your target market is people over the age of 75 with chronic health issues and live in Kansas, you may not want to use Kuan Yin and Buddha statues. Instead, your patients will probably feel more comfortable with more standard landscapes and perhaps a fountain. You can work in the Asian theme with some photographs or paintings of a water lily, lotus or orchid.

While your brand reflects who you are as a practitioner, it should reflect the sides of you that will most appeal to your target market.

I read a lot of discussion from acupuncturists who think graphic designers
are being ridiculous when they say not to use red or to use it sparingly on a logo. I don’t think so. After all, in Asia the color red might be associated with luck, but in the US, the average person is more likely to associate the color red with blood. Is your target market the average person in the US who might be worried about all those needles or is it a more sophisticated customer who knows that red is a fortunate color in Asia? Before tossing the designer’s recommendation away, practitioners should consider who their market is. Those subtle things can have an effect, especially if it makes the first impression.

I have a silly story about a business that didn’t think through their business card. It was an exterminator. They were in my neighborhood trying to drum up business. I happened to answer the door. They immediately handed me their business card. The backside was a large full color image of a black house spider. I’m phobic of spiders. I tossed the card at them and screamed at the top of my lungs. I will not be using that pest control company, ever.

Now consider, a pest control company should get along well with an arachnophobe, but this one made a very horrible impression. Not only was I afraid, looking back on my overreaction, I felt pretty stupid. It makes
a good story in how not to market but not much else.

Make sure your office, your logo, your business cards and everything else you use in your office draws your target market in rather than pushing them away. Find small things that you can do to make the patient’s experience in your office something they love. When they love your business, they’ll refer. Make them feel good about their experience.
Points to Ponder:

1) Walk into your office and pretend you’re a patient. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you smell? Are there things you’d like to change?

2) Go through the whole office looking at it through the eyes of a patient. Look in all your little corners and all the places you tend to ignore. Are there ways to freshen those areas up and make them more comfortable?

3) Have a friend walk through your office as if they are a patient. What makes the most comfortable or uncomfortable?

4) Does your office and your website reflect who you are? Does it intersect with who your ideal patient is?
For Further Investigation:


Your Business Your Brand [https://www.sba.gov/blogs/your-business-your-brand-7-simple-brand-identity-tips](https://www.sba.gov/blogs/your-business-your-brand-7-simple-brand-identity-tips)
Market Using Your Strengths

The savvy business person knows what type of marketing they are best at and goes out and does it.

There are lots of ways to market. Some people advertise in a small newspaper, some use Google ads. Some use just their website. Some write articles for a paper. Others give talks. Still others teach seminars about specific conditions. There are some who go out and talk to other professionals. There are acupuncturists at health fairs, at city fairs and at various types of expos. All of these have the potential to be great marketing strategies. What’s the best one?

Well, everyone says word of mouth. Once your brand is known to people who go out and tell more people about what a fantastic experience they had with your business, you can count on that. But first you have to find the people who will love what you do.

What works best is different for everyone. If you like talking to groups, this
activity might be for you. If you want to have a presence in your community where you give back, joining community oriented committees and participating in community events can be a great way to market. If you are quieter, you might find that writing articles for the local paper or online publications is more effective.

Basically your level of comfort and passion will come out in the type of marketing you do. If the thought of public speaking makes you break out in hives, that will come across and you won’t be the best representative of your business. The same goes with writing an article. Find ways that allow you to interact and talk about yourself and your business naturally. Those will be the most effective marketing tools that you can find.

Remember that branding is all about making people feel comfortable with you and your business. The more comfortable you are with people, the more comfortable they will be with you. Think about those things you like which let you interact with new people. Not every new person will be a potential patient, but those people also know people. If they connect with you, they’ll be thinking about their friends, family and coworkers.

One final thing, while many people are shy and don’t want to do talks or join networking groups, even the shyest person
talks to other people throughout the day. If you are getting a haircut, you might talk to the stylist. She sees a lot of people and may be happy to make referrals. If you go to the same coffee shop and your business comes up with your barista, think how many people they see every single day.

What do you do throughout the day? Does your business ever come up? Consider talking to the people you see regularly about your business and see what happens. Even if the person doesn’t show that much interest, unless you are in a large city with an acupuncturist on every corner, there’s a good chance your profession is unusual enough to make an impression on them. Don’t be surprised if you see them again and they ask more questions.
Points to Ponder:

1) Know how you like to connect and communicate with people.

2) Your best marketing strategies will put you in a position where you are comfortable being passionate and authentic about what you do.

3) Don’t underestimate the power of being really creative with marketing. If you have an idea and it sounds like fun and doesn’t cost an arm and a leg, consider trying it out. If nothing else, you might have a great time putting your idea together.
For Further Investigation:

Heart of Business http://www.heartofbusiness.com

Insights for Acupuncturists http://www.insightsforacupuncturists.com

Acupuncture Media Works http://www.acupuncturemediaworks.com/

Twelve Months to Your Ideal Private Practice Workbook http://www.amazon.com/Twelve-Months-Ideal-Private-Practice/dp/0393704173/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1416425151&sr=1-1&keywords=12+months+to+your+ideal+private+practice&pebp=1416428517413


Acupuncture Marketing https://www.acufinder.com/Acupuncture+Marketing
Repeat Customers

The savvy business person works hard to make sure customers return.

The best customers are those that keep coming back. When you’re an acupuncturist and your treatments work best on patients who return for the full course of treatment making sure patients come back for a full course is particularly important. What keeps those people coming back?

Is it great care? Is it that you are on time? Deliver what you say you will? Ask questions? Listen? Have a great receptionist who is enthusiastic about seeing people in the office? Is it your honesty?

There are a lot of reasons people return. What it comes down to is that your brand makes them feel comfortable. This goes back to connection. It is your ability to make connection that will keep that person coming back. It can also be appreciation. Let’s face it, people are busy. Fitting acupuncture into a schedule can often be more difficult than
finding money to pay for it. Those people who do make it a priority are working against the cultural norm. Their practitioners should act as if they appreciate it.

In addition to coming back because they like the acupuncturist, people come back because there are other products. Working in a multi-disciplinary clinic will keep people coming in as they try the other practitioners. Talks on wellness or yoga classes or meditation classes will keep patients returning, even if they no longer feel they need regular acupuncture. These are low key options that keep people engaged with your business in ways that may feel like a lower commitment and at a lower cost. These other options also help bring in people who might otherwise be worried about trying acupuncture.

Staying in touch is another way to keep people coming back. A monthly or quarterly newsletter reminds people that you’re around. Sending out a reminder that it’s been awhile since they were last in let’s people know you are still there. As the acupuncture profession grows, there are more options for pre-written content for newsletters or even pre-written newsletters. Things are getting easier and easier.

Social media is another way to reach people. But beware that each site can become
time consuming and as much of a timewaster as it is a helper. Sites change, so allocate your social media time wisely, offering content that appeals to your target base and doesn’t just copy the same old articles that every other acupuncturist is sharing. The noise of social media requires that you really stand out and be true to yourself and your brand to have any level of success. For many small businesses, while social media may be useful to drive people to sign up for a newsletter, it’s less useful for getting new patients immediately in the door.

One thing that many acupuncturist overlook is the value of local information on social media. Is the power out? Get an update from the power company and let your patients know what is happening at your clinic. Are you working with power? Working without power? Closed until the power comes back on? Not seeing patients because of loss of power but having an impromptu brown bag lunch lecture? These are ways to utilize local area issues on your social media page. Additionally, people will share what they hear from you about the power outage with other locals.

Standing out on social media means offering information your target market wants. Athletes may love following the local sports team. Fibromyalgia patients may be
interested in what the local support group is doing. Know your target market and share that information as well as information about your clinic.
Points to Ponder:

1) Do you have other products, like talks or wellness classes that can re-engage clients who may not feel the current need for acupuncture?

2) Do you stay in touch via a newsletter or birthday cards? These touches help keep your business name in mind so that if something does come up, the patient calls.

3) If you don’t have these things, which of them feels like the most authentic thing you can add? What other creative ways can you come up with to remain in touch with patients?
For Further Investigation:

Keep Your Door Open http://acupuncturepracticemanagement.com/2014/08/keep-your-door-open/

Acupuncture Media Works http://www.acupuncturemediaworks.com

Getting Help

The savvy business person knows they can’t do it alone.

At some point, you need help. Some very small business owners may be able to avoid hiring someone, but for most people, there comes a time when they are working too much and need to cut back. It may mean hiring an insurance biller, a cleaning person, or someone to do the filing. It could mean a bigger jump like hiring a real receptionist as an employee or it could even mean hiring an associate so that the clinic can grow.

The initial act of hiring help can be daunting. If you’ve got smaller tasks that need to be done, it might feel better to hire someone part time to do your filing, so you gain confidence in your ability to hire the right person.

It may seem easiest to hire someone to do a one-time task, like creating your website. You can think of them as your employee for the duration of the task but when their task is done, you pay and they move on to the next client. If the interaction went well, you gain
confidence in your skills to interview and hire a worker. If things don’t go well, then that can damage your confidence. It’s one reason it can be helpful to hire someone to do something you understand.

In general it seems like the two things most business people need but have the most difficulty hiring are website designers and graphic designers.

I have done website design professionally and a good friend of mine is a graphic designer. Something we both find difficult is how often people don’t really know how to express what they want when it comes to visuals. Further, from a website design point of view, people don’t understand what an easy change is versus a complicated change, which can often mean frustration between the designer and the client. The client thinks they are asking for something easy but in reality they are asking for something quite complex. The designer may not know how to express this (or be too embarrassed to) and just suggest something different. The client says no, not simply because it’s not their vision but because they’re afraid the new idea will cost more or be more work. Needless to say, these two are not communicating.

If you’ve tried to hire someone to design a logo or design your website and
feel like an abject failure, it’s not you. Those are two of the hardest things to have done, no matter how professional or skilled the other person is. Worse, because websites have become so easy to design, I often see people with little experience or knowledge marketing themselves as web designers, offering poorly coded designs.

Website design and logo design are great things to contract out, but this particular area can be fraught with pitfalls. It’s unfortunate that these are two jobs that really need to be done so early in the life the business because it would be much better if the business owner had some hiring experience first. Still, just be aware of the potential pitfalls and don’t let a bad experience here keep you from trying the hiring process for a different task.

If you’ve been doing your own insurance billing and understand it, this is a much better place to hire someone. This particular part of the acupuncture business can be time consuming and brings in no extra business. This is about getting paid for something you’ve already done. Cleaning is another thing that keeps your office running smoothly but can get time consuming so it may be another place to hire out. More practitioners are beginning to utilize a laundry
service. These are all business-to-business companies and they work hard to keep your business as a customer. This means they can be far easier to work with, perhaps even helping you with questions and offering options you haven’t thought of before.

Online scheduling is a big help for many acupuncturists. Patients seem to like it because they can go online at any time and schedule an appointment. If the patient thinks about what they need to do at ten at night, they don’t have to call and leave a message. They can make the appointment right then. Other practitioners find their patients like a more personal touch. They might use a virtual receptionist to answer their phone. This is great for people with a lot of questions, but again it’s important to get the right people on the phone.

Finally, there are those who have hired receptionists, office managers, associates and even practitioners from other fields to work in their office space. The paperwork is greater but the rewards can also be greater. Each of these people can help the main practitioner leverage their time so that they are able to make more money per hour of work.

Before you hire, it’s important to know exactly what you need. Start small, with tasks that you’re familiar with, so you can
oversee how well the person does. As you gain confidence, you can consider hiring someone to do other tasks that will help you see patients more effectively. If you are the type of person who envisions a larger clinic than taking on employees will be part of your job. If you aren’t, then staying small and making use of many of the great virtual and contract businesses that are there to help you can be invaluable.
Points to Ponder:

1) What will help free up the most time for you with the least amount of financial investment?

2) Which tasks do you understand well but absolutely hate having to do?

3) What is your overall business goal? Which tasks take time away from meeting those goals but still need to be done?
For Further Investigation:

Hire Your First Employee https://www.sba.gov/content/hire-your-first-employee

Hiring Employees (from the IRS) http://www.irs.gov/Businesses/Small-Businesses-&-Self-Employed/Hiring-Employees

Taking a Break

The savvy business person knows that it’s important to take vacations and they make a plan to allow themselves to do so.

Everyone needs a break. The best business people plan for breaks so that they can leave their business. They know that their business will still be there when they get back. They take breaks before they are desperate for one because they’ve made plans for the time off.

As acupuncture grows in popularity, there are more practitioners who are willing to do just vacation coverage. Having someone around that you trust is invaluable. Find people who might be willing to do coverage for you before you need a vacation. Find out how this works within the structure of your business. Of course, if you are lucky enough to have an associate, you already have someone who can take over for you, perhaps
by working an extra day each week.

Some practitioners find that taking a long weekend or changing around a work schedule for a “long weekend” that stretches to five or six days can be enough. What works for you? Do you do better taking a few short breaks or one longer one?

If you plan ahead and you know which months are busiest for you, you may be able to plan to leave for your slowest times. Of course, if you love to ski and your slowest month is June, this may not work well if you live in the northern hemisphere. By planning ahead you can set your priorities. Are your priorities to have as much fun on a vacation as possible and returning happy and relaxed or is your priority to minimize how many patient treatments you miss? Sometimes you have to make choices and those choices can change depending upon where you are financially.

Planning ahead lets you make these choices wisely. In the first year, maybe you don’t have to worry as much but when you are ten years into your practice with people who depend upon you, you need to consider those decisions. Do what works for you and lets you feel the most refreshed. Everyone has different needs for time off and for vacation. Take yours as you need it.

When you’re working longer hours to
get to the next step of your business, you’ll be glad you took some time off. You won’t feel nearly as burnt out and will know that you’ll be able to rest soon enough.
Points to Ponder:

1) Do you know which months are slowest for you? If not, find out.

2) What type of vacation is best for you? Do you like to get away for short breaks frequently or do you like one longer break less frequently?

3) Financially what works best for you? Mentally? Which do you feel you need to honor more?
For Further Investigation:


Take a Vacation from Your Small Business http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2014-06-26/how-to-take-a-vacation-from-your-small-business


Therapists Need Vacations Too http://www.zynynme.com/blog/2014/5/19/therapists-need-vacations-too-recharging-so-you-can-respond
Additional Income Streams

The savvy business person knows that they can’t always count on being able to work and they have strategies in place to keep money flowing in.

If you own your own business, you know that it depends upon you. A vacation is one thing, but what happens if you can’t work for long periods of time?

Many people think they are okay because they have some sort of disability insurance or their partner makes enough to help them get by. But what happens if your partner is the one who is disabled and you are the only person there to help out? What happens if you don’t have disability insurance and you get into an accident that prevents you from working for months? What if you have to have surgery? Want to have a baby?

You can’t plan for everything, but it’s good to have some ideas of the ways in which you can plan ahead and hedge against some of these disasters. Lisa Hanfileti talks about
passive income because she nearly lost her business due to a family emergency. There was a large chunk of time she wasn’t able to work. Lisa created a website to help acupuncturists with the business side of acupuncture called Insights For Acupuncturists. She links to affiliates there so that every time someone purchases from her, she gets a bit of money.

Lisa has created webinars, which are available online, about topics like the three things your websites must do. The webinars were taught once but she continues to get income each time someone signs up to watch them in their own time. This is a classic case of leveraging your time.

As a writer, this happens for me organically. I write books and people purchase them when they want them. I may have written a book a few years ago, but it can continue to make money. With books like this one, there is some time needed to update it as things change, but the bulk of the book can remain out there for sale, making a bit of money each month as new people find it.

Other acupuncturists have different ways of keeping the money flowing. When I worked in an office with another practitioner, she had two close family members die in a short period of time. As one death happened overseas, she had to travel a lot which meant
she was out of the office for nearly three months. I rented space in her clinic and took over seeing the bulk of her patients as well as my own. It was a lot of work for me and I was more than happy to turn her patients back over to her. We worked well together, referring back and forth when we felt a particular patient might be more helped by the other. Our patients trusted us so there was no embarrassment or hard feelings when she returned and most people wanted to go back to seeing her.

Financially, I worked for only part of the collected income for each patient. This meant that she could keep making her business overhead and take in some money for her personal necessities. For those thinking of taking on another practitioner, this backup can be an added bonus. Be sure to spell out the exact financial arrangements for when the business owner and the associate need to be away from the clinic and what is expected of each person.

The chiropractor I see is getting older and as he planned for his aging, he moved his solo office into an office with another practitioner. His reasoning was that he had equipment that his family would have no idea how to deal with when he died. This way, he had a partner who could utilize it and make sure it wasn’t given away. I’m sure he had something written into the contract to protect the family
he left behind. Further, if he did become disabled, there was someone around who knew his patients and had full access to files. As he’s one of the best chiropractors I’ve ever seen, I am hopeful that nothing happens to him for a very long time, but I admire his strategy for planning ahead.

This is one time when networking and knowing other practitioners in your area can be very helpful. After all, if you have friends who do acupuncture, you know you have people you can count on to be as much assistance as possible. Even having a great employee who can come in and answer phones can take a lot of stress off if you do have to deal with an unexpected emergency that keeps you away.

Should an emergency happen and you are under prepared, remember to deal as professionally with patients as you can. I was trying to hire a cleaning person and the woman who came most highly recommended found out the day she was supposed to come give me an estimate that her father was dying. She forgot until she got a phone reminder and she called me immediately to apologize and explain. I really appreciated being in the loop and not just left hanging and when she returned I was more than happy to make contact and hire her to clean my house.
Points to Ponder:

1) Do you work solo or do you have a partner? What happens if you can’t work for a long time?

2) As a solo practitioner, if there is an emergency, injury or illness and you can’t contact your patients, is there someone you can count on to phone them and let them know what’s happening?

3) If you work in a larger clinic, do you have something in writing about responsibilities and what needs to be done if you are unavailable for a long period of time?
For Further Investigation:

Insights for Acupuncturists http://www.insights-for-acupuncturists

Smart Passive Income http://www.smartpassiveincome.com/


Multiple Streams of Income http://www.amazon.com/Multiple-Streams-Income-Generate-Unlimited/dp/0471714550/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1416430710&sr=8-1&keywords=multiple+streams+of+income
Retirement

The savvy business person has a retirement plan.

Finally, you need a way out. Many acupuncturists don’t ever envision themselves doing anything but acupuncture and perhaps working until they drop. Clearly not everyone will be able to do that nor does everyone want to.

Plan for how you want to retire. That means putting a portion of your income into a retirement account. It may mean creating various passive income streams that could continue to make money even when you are retired. It can also mean knowing the value of your business.

Valuing your business and having someone professionally do this is not part of this book, however there are people who specialize helping others with that task. Know that such services are available, not only for retirement, but if you need to move. You built something and you should have some compensation you can take with you when
you need to leave it behind.

Many businesses will be too expensive for an interested practitioner to purchase outright. You might consider taking on an associate who will buy out your practice. Perhaps they work with you for a while and pay you money each month and then offer you a larger payment at the end. Maybe you have a longer term contract where they continue to pay well into your retirement, based on a set asking price. Contracts like these should be written up by an attorney who can help you make the decision based on your financial needs and potential tax burdens.

For those lucky enough to have purchased a building in which to practice, congratulations. You have a retirement income set so long as someone continues to practice there. You can sell the practice itself but remain the landlord. In fact, you don’t even have to do landlord-type duties. You can hire someone. Not bad if you were able to make the purchase in the first place.

Sometimes things happen. Highways get built and perhaps your perfect clinic is no longer in a great space. You might not be able to count on that income forever, so make sure you have more than one source of retirement income. Work on having several streams of income. Create some lectures in your area of
specialty or write books. If you do this, and people want to hear you speak, you have the option of speaking at conferences and perhaps getting some free travel as well as a speaking fee. Even if you don’t want to speak, having another bit of income coming in can certainly be fun, even if it’s irregular.

Another aspect of retirement income is knowing what you want to do after you retire. I’m a huge fan of having books that will keep generating income even after I stop writing. Lisa Hanfileti is a fan of a webinar or lecture series. I have also done some vacation coverage which is another way to generate a little income if you don’t want to practice full time but aren’t quite ready to give up acupuncture.

Another friend said she didn’t want to work at all. When she was retired, she wanted to be retired. Which is fair. After all, for most of us, we’ve worked really hard during our years of building a practice and helping people. We do get tired and part of being a good business person is self-care. This other woman can sell her practice and get some money out of it. She’ll also have her retirement accounts, which she has put money into regularly for the last twenty years. After that, she can go sit on the beach and drink margaritas if that’s what she wants.

I’ve always wanted to write, so for me
retirement is about making that dream come true. My husband went into computers rather than teaching because he wanted to offer his son a better life than he could have offered if he became a teacher. He wants to substitute teach after retirement. Knowing what you want after retirement, whether it’s a slightly different career, cutting back on the same career, or just being beholden to no one is important when making a plan.

It’s also a good idea to have a plan for the age you want to retire at. Shoot for being able to retire a few years before you think you’ll want to. If you think 65 is a good number, then try to have things in place by the time you are 62. You can always work longer if you decide you want to. If you have to stop sooner than you planned, that’s much harder. Remember, a savvy business person is prepared.
Points to Ponder:

1) How long do you envision yourself working?

2) If you didn’t run your acupuncture business, what would you do?

3) What types of income streams do you have in place for retirement? Do you have a retirement account like an IRA or 401K? Do you have passive income coming in? What do you need to start doing to create that retirement income?
For Further Investigation:

Insights For Acupuncturists http://www.insights-for-acupuncturists.com

The Practitioner’s Journey http://practitionersjourney.com/

What do you need when you retire from your small business http://www.ehow.com/info_7863725_do-need-retire-own-business.html

Final Thoughts

It doesn’t pay to be a great acupuncturist and a poor business person. You limit the number of people you can see because you aren’t making any money. The more your business feeds you, via money, the more people you can help. The vast majority of people in this profession went into it wanting to help people. Unfortunately a reality of today’s world is that good intentions don’t pay the rent. Practitioners need to make sound business decisions to keep a roof over their heads and allow themselves to treat patients.

It’s never too early to start planning ahead. If you find this book while you are still in school, then start planning, even for retirement. It’s all part of being in business.

Unless an acupuncturist has come out of school with a strong entrepreneurial background, they will have missed some aspects of running a business. There are great coaches out there who can help people.
Lisa Hanfileti has Insights for Acupuncturists and runs the Acupuncture Business Academy. Her page on Facebook is very active. She’s willing to answer questions, bring in specialists who can help with specific issues, and is an invaluable resource. I’m waiting for her book!

Mark Silver and the great folks at Heart of Business do amazing business coaching. From focusing on your target market, to helping write great website copy, to specific issues that can cause problems when a business starts growing, Mark and the coaching staff that work with him are awesome. They have private coaching as well as classes and group coaching.

SCORE is a great resource for any small business owner who needs a concrete answer about licensing and laws when starting or running a business. Don’t overlook them. They aren’t coaches but they do have lots of information.

Remember that part about getting help? Coaching is help. A good coach can help you see your blind spots. They can help you focus on a plan of reaching that next goal that always seems just out of reach. A good business coach may look expensive, but they can boost your practice enough to make that expense invaluable.
Your treatments are your main business product. Don’t think that you can give them away or not bill your patients because you’re being nice. If you don’t bill your patients, you can’t survive doing acupuncture. If you can’t survive doing acupuncture, where will those people go? Not charging or under charging doesn’t do anyone any favors. Start treating your practice like a business and thrive.
About the Author

Bonnie Koenig, LAc graduated from Pacific Lutheran University in 1985 and Oregon College of Oriental Medicine in 1999. She practiced acupuncture until 2010. In between colleges she worked a variety of professions, including veterinary receptionist, library assistant, and cemetery administrator.

In 2005 she moved from Vancouver, WA to the Seattle area. Setting up a new practice was hard and she did some work designing websites and creating marketing materials for other practitioners while she worked on growing her business. In 2010, she decided to focus her work around writing. Writing was her first love and it seemed the appropriate time to start working towards the goal of being a published author.

Bonnie writes as Bonnie Koenig, LAc on books for acupuncturists and acupuncture books for lay people. She writes fiction under the name Bonnie Elizabeth. She writes about her Siamese under her cat’s name Chey.
You can find her at her website http://www.bonniekoeniglac.com.

If you are interested in her other writing you can find My Big Fat Orange Cat at http://www.mybigfatorangecat.com and follow us on Facebook at https://www.facebook.com/MyBigFatOrangeCat.
More Book by Bonnie Koenig, LAc and Lilac Point Press

Websites for Acupuncturists
10 Myths About Acupuncture

Coming Soon:

Untold Stories: Twelve Stories of Successful American Acupuncturists in the New Millenium (with Jason Stein, LAc)