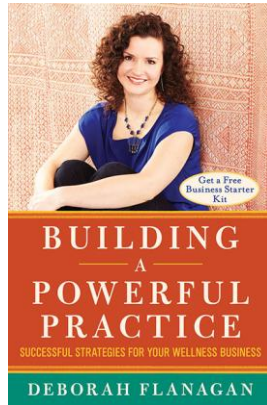


Sample Chapter

Building a Powerful Practice: Successful Strategies for Your Wellness Business By Deborah Flanagan



Chapter 6: Defining Your Niche

Before you can dig into the details of how to market your practice and build your client base, which I'll discuss shortly, you'll need to define your ideal client or niche market.

What do I mean by "niche market"? Niche marketing means focusing your marketing efforts on a small, but specific and well-defined segment of the population. In other words, what are the age range, gender, education level, income, background, and presenting issues of your ideal client?

I know it might seem counterintuitive to narrow your focus and get specific about the kinds of clients you want to work with. It's common to hear new practitioners say they want to see anyone and everyone who needs help (I remember thinking this, too.), but aiming too broadly actually defuses your ability to attract clients. Here's an analogy: would you go to a restaurant that serves Chinese, Greek, Italian, American, *and* Indian food? Or would you rather go to a restaurant that specializes in one of those?

I remember a story my first Reiki teacher, Margaret Ann Case, told me years ago about finding your niche. She gave the metaphor of a lighthouse shining in the dark. If the lighthouse is moving around, trying to shine brightly for every boat in the ocean, it's not as effective as if the lighthouse is fixed in one place close to shore for the nearby boats who really need the light to navigate near that particular shore.

Now, I'm not saying you can't ever see clients who fall outside your niche, or that you have to have it all figured out before you open your practice. But having some ideas about the kinds of people you'd like to work with will be helpful. For example, back when I was finishing my Reiki III (Reiki Master) training, one of the requirements for certification was to write a business plan. In this business plan I had to define my niche and my ideal client. I came up with some general demographics: I knew I liked working with young professional women aged twenty to thirty-five.

At first I was a little frustrated that I couldn't define my niche more specifically. But looking back, I don't know that I could have narrowed it down further without a process of experimentation in practice. With time, I realized that I really liked working with women dealing with a transition, whether it was a career, relationship, or health issue. These women were ready to make a big change in their lives and do something different, because what they'd been doing wasn't working for them anymore. I wouldn't have been able to know that I liked helping these kind of clients until I worked with enough kinds of people to realize it.

I think if in the beginning you have a general sense of your ideal client, that's a good starting point. And if you're more clear, all the better. Sometimes new practitioners already know exactly what kinds of clients they want to work with, and that's wonderful. For example, I have a colleague who dealt with severe pain in her reproductive system. As a result, she is inspired to help others who are dealing with chronic pain. Similarly, based on your own background, you can bring to the table certain qualities you've learned, or problems you've dealt with or overcome, that you'd like to help other people with—a specific health issue, phobia, or life challenge, for example.

I know another practitioner who comes from the finance sector and really enjoys working with people in this field. He knows firsthand what it feels like to be super-stressed and burned out, looking for something more fulfilling in life. Another colleague is a lawyer, and she focuses her hypnosis practice on helping new lawyers build their confidence in the courtroom. Another practitioner comes from the theater world, and focuses her Reiki practice working with performing artists. These are some examples to give you a range of ideas as you determine your niche. If you have hobbies, expertise, or a certain background or passion for something, this is a great place to start. But it's also okay to simply be as specific as you can, and then let your practice evolve over time like mine did.

Don't be too hard on yourself if you don't know your niche right off the bat, or if your initial ideas about what you want turn out to be misguided. I experimented with different niches early on. I thought maybe I would work with people who have migraines and headaches because of the neurologist I was going to work with. By chance I had a lot of fertility clients, so I thought about specializing in that, and at some point I thought the same thing about clients with digestive issues. Over time I realized that for me, seeing people with the exact same issue over and over was burning me out a little. I like variety. I still see clients for fertility issues, but it's not the bulk of my practice, and I think this balance works better for everyone concerned.

NLP and hypnosis teachers and practitioners Sarah and Shawn Carson told me about the importance of finding a niche:

“One of the quickest ways to building a practice is to choose a niche. Niche is important because it establishes you as the authority in your community. When people have your niche problem, they will automatically think of you. And of course you will still get lots of other clients too because when you are the expert in one area, people will believe you are also skilled in other areas.”

Pamela Herrick, who, as I mentioned, lives in a small, rural community, thinks of niche differently: “For my practice, the key to success has been to specialize. I am the only full-time Thai massage therapist within a thirty-minute drive.” She's specializing in the kind of bodywork that she does. Similar to Pamela's experience, as my practice has evolved, I've begun to combine Reiki, reflexology, and hypnosis in the same session, and this is another way I define my niche, further differentiating me from other practitioners.

Is it better to offer more?

New practitioners often ask me if I see clients more for Reiki, hypnosis, or reflexology and if it's better to add more modalities to their practice.

I've seen practitioners who include a laundry list of techniques and modalities on their business card. Don't get me wrong: I think continuing education is vital, and I love taking new classes and learning new techniques and models of healing—but I'm not planning on adding more to my practice. I like variety, and I like having different tools I can use depending on the client and the issue that they're seeking to treat. But I also think it's really important to be thoroughly trained and knowledgeable about what you do, rather than diluting your practice with too many different things. If you're just starting out as a new practitioner, stick with one modality and become really proficient at it. Then, if you're truly interested in learning something else, study it for a while and see if you want to add it into your practice.

Sometimes people want to race through getting all these different modalities under their belt, or they love taking classes, but never get started with their practice as they keep waiting and focusing on accruing more knowledge. Remember that taking a weekend class in something doesn't make you an expert. It can also be confusing to your clients, because then they have to pick from among the laundry list of services you offer. Moreover, from a marketing perspective, it's easier to specialize in one modality—it's easier to explain, and it's more focused. It's a mouthful for me to say the three things I do, and that's definitely a drawback. Keep it simple as you get really good at what you do, and then expand from there if you feel called to do so.

Worries about competition

Sometimes new practitioners (and seasoned practitioners as well) worry about competition from others. The more you define your niche, the less competition you'll feel. When you're working with clients who are the perfect fit for your skills—your expertise, the things you're passionate and knowledgeable about, your life experiences—you'll do your best work. There's no way another practitioner can replicate your style, and people pick up on this authenticity, so that in the long run you'll attract the clients who need what you uniquely offer.

I like to remind myself that my ideal clients will find me if I stay true to myself, do my best, and continue with my personal practice (which for me is my meditation practice, taught within the system of Reiki).

Another Reiki practice opened very near Frans Stiene's office and school in Australia, but it didn't bother him. In fact, he thought it was a good thing:

"In essence, when we see someone as our competition, then this is based on our own insecurity. When we know as practitioners or teachers that we are doing the best that we can, 110 percent, then we have no fear of anybody teaching in our area, or neighborhood.

"This is also based on our own faith in what we do, faith within our practice and in what we teach. This faith is not established straight away; we need to work on this through our own personal practice [within the system of Reiki, or whatever meditation practice you have]. Through doing the meditations, we start to gain faith in the teachings and in what we do. This faith in turn gives us a solid foundation so that we do not see other practitioners or teachers as competitors."

Here's how Thai massage therapist and coach Pamela Herrick views competition living in a rural town:

"When I opened my private practice here in the Hudson Valley, a dear friend of mine and an experienced massage therapist said to me, 'Honey, sadly there is no end of pain in the world.' She helped me to see my practice and the community I work in as a glass half full.

"She told me to get treatment with every therapist in town, to see them as my colleagues, and to recognize that we are not in competition. The truth is, there is more need in any community than we could ever hope to meet."

Homework: Define Your Niche

- What kinds of clients do you want to work with?

- What interests and personal experiences do you have that might inform your niche?

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