

## To Advertise or Not To Advertise. How Do You Decide?

One of the biggest mistakes counselors make is to assume that they must advertise their practice in order to get clients. Counselors often tell me they have spent a lot of money on advertising with minimal, if any, results. Many become discouraged with advertising, and some even give up on the idea of having a private practice assuming they have no other options for marketing their practice.

It is not surprising that this happens. Not knowing what else to do, advertising is usually the first method that comes to mind when thinking of promoting your practice. It is a method of marketing that you see on a daily basis, so it's only natural that you would think of using it.

The problem with advertising is that, in most instances, it is one of the most costly and least effective ways for you, as a counselor, to attract clients. On average, it takes approximately 5-7 contacts with a person before they buy a product or service from you. This means that potential clients or referral sources would have to be exposed to your ad numerous times before they might take action, i.e. pick up the phone and call you.

Furthermore, a larger problem with advertising is that people are more interested in seeing a counselor who they have had personal exposure to in some way, or a counselor who has been referred to them by someone they know and trust.

Finally, advertising works best when you target your ads to a very specific population. Few counselors have a defined target market, and even if they do, they don't know how to write effective ads.

For these reasons, I usually don't recommend advertising as a main method of promotion for new counselors. There are more cost-effective ways to get the word out and become visible; for example, public speaking, writing articles, and networking, to name a few.

If you are convinced you need to advertise or have a reason to believe that your ads will bring you the clients that you want, here are some guidelines that will help you maximize the results you get from your financial investment.

**1. When placing an ad, make the decision up front that you will commit to run it for 6 months to a year so that people get used to seeing it repeatedly.** You can't expect to get results from an ad that you have only placed for a short period of time. Repetition is key here.

**2. Your ad will be more effective if you gear it towards a specific target market.** For example, directing your ad towards all people who might want a counselor is not as effective as focusing it towards those who are experiencing a particular problem (e.g. loss of relationship or problem with alcohol or drugs) and/or belong to a specific group of people (e.g. women with a chronic illness). People want to see someone whom they believe has expertise with their problem. You cannot be an expert at anything if your market is too broad. Furthermore, when people see an ad that speaks to them and their problems directly, they are more likely to respond to it.

**3. Advertising works best when you place your ad in a well targeted publication.** Think of the type of client you want to attract and their problem(s), find out what they read, and place your ad in these publications. For example, if you work with parents of young children, you might want to place your ad in a parenting magazine. Likewise, if your market is helping pregnant women, you might try to find publications or websites that they read.

**4. Make the client's concerns the focus of your ad, not yourself or your services.** Open the ad by addressing the core problem(s) your clients are experiencing, so that when they read it, they say to themselves, "Yes, that's me. This is exactly the problem I'm having." In the end, you will not only get more clients this way, but your clients will be better served because they will be more suitable for your particular services. In addition to addressing the concerns of the market you are targeting, be sure to mention a few key benefits your clients can expect to experience if they work with you.

**5. Check out places where you can advertise for free.** Some places and publications will allow this, so check around. Placing ads for free can also be a good way to test out your ads to see what kind of results you get.

**6. Don't rely on advertising alone to market your practice.** Advertising works best when used as part of an integrated marketing strategy. Again, because of the "5-7 contacts" principle mentioned above, the more ways you make yourself repeatedly visible, the more potential clients and referral sources will be exposed to you and your services and the more clients you will get.

It can be challenging and costly to market a private practice. Spend your money wisely if you choose to advertise, and recognize that results from advertising are rarely immediate. Unless you have a large expense budget and follow the guidelines above, you are probably better off finding alternative means for marketing your practice.

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