

## **Marketing and Ethics: Separating Fears from Reality**

Counselors and healing professionals often have ethical concerns about marketing their practice. While it is absolutely essential that you conduct your marketing in an ethical manner, sometimes apprehensions about marketing are misguided. In fact, some concerns have more to do with one's own discomfort or misunderstandings around marketing than they do about ethics.

In this article, I will discuss the most common ethical about marketing that I have seen expressed by counselors and other healing professionals.

### **Selling or Promoting Yourself to Clients**

Many Counselors and healing professionals are uncomfortable with, or believe it to be unethical to 'sell' or 'promote' themselves to potential clients. A large part of this concern stems from the fact that many professionals do not understand what it means to market or to sell one's services.

In it's simplest definition, marketing is about making yourself visible to your potential clients. This can mean anything from telling people what you do when you meet them at a social function, to advertising and delivering presentations or workshops to your target market.

Another problem is that helping and healing professionals have often been taught that their job is to 'be there' for their clients and not for themselves. Of course, you must do your utmost to be present for your clients. However, this notion is not incompatible with letting potential or current clients know about the services you are offering.

Obviously, if you hold onto the belief that it is not ethical to promote yourself, there is a problem. If you want to have a successful private practice, you will need clients, which means you have to let people know (market) your services somehow.

### **Concerns About Being Seen as Aggressive, Manipulative, or Insincere**

Many helpers and healers are concerned that they might be seen in the same light as marketers who are insincere, aggressive or manipulative.

It is understandable that you, as a counselor, therapist, coach or healer, might be concerned about appearing this way considering that we are bombarded on a daily basis with marketing that lacks integrity. However, there is nothing that says that you have to market in this manner. Most successful marketers do not engage in unethical tactics.

If you are blocked in your marketing by a concern like this, you might want to ask yourself if you intend to be insincere, manipulative or aggressive in how you market. Is this the kind of person you are? Of course, your answer is 'no,' in which case, you might want to ask yourself what the real concern is here. While you need to be direct and focused in your marketing if you want to be successful, it is pointless to be concerned about behaving in a manner that you don't want or intend to engage in.

You can leave behind any worries that you might be lumped together with dishonest and aggressive marketers by ensuring that you always act with sincerity and integrity

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when you are marketing, as you would in your work with your clients. Ultimately, you will be seen as you present yourself.

### **The Use of Client Testimonials in Marketing Materials**

Some professionals have ethical concerns about using client testimonials. This is a valid concern in cases where professional and regulating bodies do not permit their members to utilize client testimonials in their marketing materials. Obviously, you will always want to follow the guidelines outlined by your professional or regulating body.

However, if you are not restricted in this way from using testimonials, you might want to consider incorporating them into your marketing materials, as they are a key aspect of illustrating credibility. Still, depending on your profession and the client, you should use some caution when doing so.

First, choose your clients carefully and make sure they don't feel pressured or obligated to provide a testimonial for you.

Second, use full names, if possible, as your testimonial will have more credibility. However, if your client is uncomfortable with using their full name you could use their initials or allow them to remain anonymous. The key here is to ask for permission and honor client's wishes. If you feel that it is not in your client's best interest for them to provide a testimonial, then listen to that and don't ask.

If you are not comfortable at all using client testimonials, or are restricted from doing so by your professional association or regulating body, you might want to use testimonials from employers, colleagues and referral sources. In the end, you must do what you are comfortable with.

### **Following Up With and/or Soliciting Referrals From Clients**

Following up with past or prospective clients is seen as inappropriate for some counselors and healing professionals. In most cases, however, I think this concern is misguided. There are many respectful, non-intrusive and helpful ways you can keep in touch with past clients.

As with most marketing strategies, it is the 'how' that is important. If you are pestering past clients by nagging them for referrals obviously this would be cause for concern (from a marketing as well as an ethical perspective).

However, if you simply let your clients know that you are open to taking on more clients, many of them would be more than happy to refer others to you.

Furthermore, if you ask permission to put clients on your mailing or newsletter list, many will be pleased to be on that list and to have access to the information you provide to them. Many clients will actually be happy to have a way to stay in touch with you.

In summary, you should always ensure that you market your services with integrity. In determining what is, and isn't ethical you will, at times, have to use your own judgment. Ultimately, you will need to follow the ethical guidelines of your profession and do what you are most comfortable with.

At the same time, I encourage you to stretch yourself beyond your comfort zone with your marketing strategies. If you find yourself being concerned about whether something you are doing is ethical, ask yourself honestly whether this is about your own discomfort or fear, or whether it is a legitimate concern. If your concern is really about you, you might want to work on getting over it. Your success will depend upon it.

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