



AMERICAN COUNSELING ASSOCIATION

## American Counseling Association

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# MARKETING & ADVERTISING

## TRADITIONAL AND NON-TRADITIONAL APPROACHES

" As a service to members, the American Counseling Association has partnered with Walsh and Dasenbrook, consultants in counseling practice management, to offer a series of bulletins on various private practice topics. This series includes timely information on starting or expanding a private practice, informed consent, HIPAA, managed care and insurance companies and strategies for enrolling as providers."

Walsh and Dasenbrook have co-authored *The Complete Guide to Private Practice for Licensed Mental Health Professionals 3<sup>rd</sup> edition*. Their Guide contains the latest information on marketing, advertising, office procedures, dealing with managed healthcare, and insurance billing. It also contains a CD-Rom with all the forms necessary for your practice. The Guide can be purchased through their web site at [Counseling-PrivatePractice.com](http://Counseling-PrivatePractice.com). For more information you can contact the authors at 3703 N. Main St. Suite, 100 Rockford, IL. 61103 815.877.0399

Sometimes therapists don't think counseling and marketing/advertising go together in the same sentence. Remember, you need to see yourself as promoting a business or selling a product that you believe in, something that works, is cost effective, and helps people lead productive, enriched lives. Wouldn't you be interested in a business or product that could do that? You are it! We present the following ideas for your consideration. These ideas are by no means the only ones. Be creative; think outside the "box." Confidence and a positive attitude are the first steps. Put on your "success hat," and then cock it to one side.

### **A Marketing Plan**

Marketing or advertising may take counselors out of their comfort zones. There may be a mindset that promoting one's self or one's practice is somehow a disagreeable event. If you don't do it, another counselor will! If you want your practice to be the potentially rewarding experience it can be, you will need to acquire a certain level of confidence in selling yourself. You could be the world's best counselor, but if potential clients don't know of you, your talents will go untapped. In our seminars we challenge counselors to see themselves as providing a unique and valuable service that is cost effective, enriches people's lives, and promotes growth and development. And that service has a tremendous value in the market place.

Developing an ongoing marketing plan is essential to any business, and counseling is no different. Not only do we need to launch a practice, but also we need to make that practice self-sustaining. ACA's code of ethics helps give some guidance in this area. Additionally, Robert Walsh's "8-step method" (found here in the Private Practice Pointers section, Start Up) is an excellent example of a marketing plan, emphasizing public speaking as the main component to marketing counseling services. While we feel public speaking is one of the most productive marketing strategies, a great marketing plan includes numerous other components. Common sense and a professional approach will help you be able to market yourself directly to clients and referral sources.

Before embarking on your marketing plan you need to develop professional print material. The two most critical pieces are business cards and a brochure. While this

sounds painfully obvious, we have seen some really bad material. If you have some computer savvy, you can do the materials yourself. You may also hire a consultant to do it for you. These materials need to look clean and sharp. Less is more! Most consultants will tell you blank space is a good thing. Resist the temptation to give too much information, thus confusing the client or referral source. Be cautious to not overpower the card with too much color, or with symbols that could be confusing. Name, degree, title, license, office address, phone and fax number, e-mail, and web site are important. Name a service or two, i.e., Marriage and Family Counseling, Counseling and Mediation; remember, keep it simple.

A bifold or trifold brochure is a cost-effective way to get more information to potential clients and referral sources. As with the business card, less is more. Blank space helps draw the eye to key pieces of information. Include the same information as the business card, but consider your picture (head shot), a short treatment approach statement, whether you accept insurance, specialties (but don't list too many) and other services such as workshops, consulting, custody evaluations, forensics, etc.

A periodic newsletter, with articles of interest to clients, is also a good marketing tool. These can be mailed or distributed in the community. Schools and clinics like to have these materials as a public service. One popular newsletter article addressed how to help children get organized and make homework less painful. Another gave points on how to help men listen so their wives feel understood. Humor and color make newsletters appealing. Make sure your contact information is prominent on everything you distribute.

If you already have print material, review it. Does it communicate the desired message about you and your practice? Does it promote you first and your practice second? Clients and referral sources generally seek out the individual counselors they have heard good things about, not group practices. So make sure *you* are emphasized in the material.

The biggest marketing mistake most counselors make is spending too much on phonebook advertising. When we first started, and for a number of years after, we would

spend hours developing and refining our ad in the phonebook. When the new phonebooks would come out we would immediately look at our ad and marvel at it. Something about seeing the ad was thrilling. Resist this pleasure; it doesn't pay off. Think about it. When you travel, look at the pages and pages of ads for counseling in the local phonebook. Usually, clients who find a counselor in the phonebook don't show up or can't afford the fee. Just take the standard listing in the phonebook that comes with your business phone number.

A good marketing plan will target both clients directly and those individuals and services (potential referral sources) that come in contact with potential clients. Marketing consultants will tell you that repetition is important. Don't do one or two big projects; think smaller and more often.

In marketing directly to potential clients, public speaking is a good plan. Giving talks or speeches is an excellent way to promote yourself. Church groups, civic organizations, support groups, schools, PTO's, associations, professional societies, women's and men's groups are always looking for speakers for their meetings. You can pass out your promotional pieces or give a one page handout with your name and number on it. Most of these groups will promote your speech, especially if it is free or low cost.

Advertising in the local shopper's guide or village newspaper monthly is another idea. Better yet, volunteer to write a column on various mental health issues in exchange for including your practice information. Start a support group and have a "press release" for these newspapers. Call the editor about doing a feature article on your group. Believe it or not, local papers are always looking for material, especially if you conduct a workshop as a community service, on a timely, helpful topic. Advertising in city newspapers can be expensive, so consider the local papers.

To prospect potential referral sources, make a list of individuals, agencies and organizations that may have contact with the type of clients you want to treat. For example if your niche is adolescents, you might want to prospect:

- Pediatricians and Family Physicians
- Middle and High Schools
- Principals
- Counselors
- Employee Assistance Programs
- Probation Departments
- Police Departments
- United Way Agencies
- Churches
- Community Mental Health Centers
- Community Centers
- Parent Support Groups
- Substance Abuse Treatment Centers
- Other counselors who only treat children or adults

Next we will focus on some traditional and not so traditional approaches to prospecting: business and industry, employee assistance programs, physicians, niches, and what we call “cross-pollinating.”

### **Business and Industry**

Business and industry is an often overlooked potential referral source. Think of yourself as an expert in human behavior and human relationships. Work groups are nothing more than families who suffer from the same pathology as the families you have counseled. Take what you know from family therapy and market the business community. There are two ways to prospect business and industry: directly, through the human resource department, or indirectly, to others who already have access. Those who already have access are usually EAPs, private consultants, and community colleges.

In prospecting directly, write a letter to the attention of the Vice President of Human Resources detailing what you can provide and how it would be appropriate. Include all your print material. VP's of HR are always looking for speakers for various departments.

Hot topics include:

- Conflict resolution
- Strategic planning
- Dealing with troubled employees
- Stress management
- Diversity
- Harassment
- Dealing with teenagers
- Dealing with change
- How to function as a team
- Workplace violence

You could offer to do seminars, retreats, interventions with troubled departments, or “brown bags” (a one hour speech to employees on their lunch hour). Moreover, offer HR your counseling services. HR knows of the employees who need help, and they need somewhere to send them. Advise them of your immediate availability, evening or weekend appointments, and specialties.

After sending your print material, follow up with a phone call asking if they received your information and if they have a need. If so, schedule an on-site meeting. Ask for a tour of the facility to acquaint yourself with the business. If the VP says they are not interested, ask if they have an EAP and if so which one. Then proceed to prospect the EAP.

Employee assistance programs (EAP) are fertile ground for potential referrals. EAP's already have an “in” and access to clients. EAP's are always looking for mental health professionals to which they can refer clients. In prospecting EAP's, take roughly the

same approach. Mail your print material and follow up with a phone to the director of the EAP.

If the EAP is local (meaning headquartered in your city with clinical staff on duty) try to get an invitation to attend their staff meeting so the entire staff can meet you and learn about what you can provide. If the EAP is national (headquartered in another city) contact the “national affiliate manager” and ask if they need more providers in your area. EAP’s like to have a number of private practitioners available to assist their client companies in out-of-town locations. If not, see if you can identify who their local providers are and prospect them. Again, emphasize the ability to see clients quickly and efficiently, and detail for them the speeches and presentations you can provide.

In prospecting private consultants, look for out-placement or recruiting firms. These firms are dealing with client companies that are undergoing significant change and may not offer training or intervention services. Send them your print material and follow up with a phone call requesting a meeting. Explain how you could help their client companies or provide training. If they are interested, they will market your services for a fee.

Most community colleges have a department that offers training and consulting services to area business and industry. While some of these services are in the technical/vocational arena, some are in the “soft” or “people” skills. The colleges promote their faculty members, but are also looking for other area professionals to give speeches, teach classes, or provide training to their industrial clients. Contact the director of the “Management Institute” at these colleges.

### **Niche Marketing**

Niche marketing is essential in building a practice. Focusing your practice in an area of your expertise and training is important. Managed Care and Employee Assistance

Programs require you to identify your areas of expertise along with your zip code for inclusion in their database. When one of their members calls looking for a therapist, they are matched with a counselor that meets their particular needs and one that has an office near them. Having expertise in a specialty unique to your area may be an asset. If you have sublet space from a physician's office as we discussed in the bulletin on "Startup" (see ACA's Private Practice Pointers), you may want to focus your practice parallel to the physician. A therapist specializing in children or teen counseling will sublet from a pediatrician; one specializing in counseling women will sublet from an OB/GYN. Alternately, if you sublet from another psychotherapist you may want to complement her or his practice. If your niche is children, sublet or partner with a marriage specialist. There are the usual niches such as individual and marital counseling. Most therapists treat anxiety and depression, and family counseling is also popular. Other niches are important to consider, especially if they are not common in your area:

- substance abuse
- teenagers
- ADD/ADHD
- weight control
- employment/ coaching
- financial counseling
- geriatric care
- stress/anxiety
- depression
- motivation/ organization
- anger management
- dance/ movement
- children with learning difficulties
- hypnosis/ relaxation exercises
- group therapy
- play therapy
- art therapy
- biofeedback
- smoking cessation
- grief/ loss
- divorce
- children of divorce
- wellness/ health issues
- eating disorders
- Pastoral counseling
- gambling
- marital

## **“Cross-Pollination”**

Every client offers a potential opportunity to expand your practice. The obvious way is for a satisfied client to recommend you to others. Another way to expand your practice is through what we call “cross-pollination.” Just as it is beneficial for plants to share pollen, it is beneficial for therapists and other professionals to share information. This is done, of course, with all release of information requirements met. When a client reviews the “client’s rights” document given at the first appointment, he or she signs a “release.”

With this release is a “coordination of treatment” document (see The Complete Guide to Private Practice written by Walsh and Dasenbrook, chapter 2, Office Procedures). It asks the client to allow you to contact his or her primary care physician. (Check your state’s practice guidelines. In many states, counselors are required to ask the client’s permission to contact the primary care physician (PCP). Many managed health care panels mandate that you contact the PCP.) Whenever you make a “coordination of treatment” contact, it is a marketing opportunity. As we discuss in cross-pollinating, clients’ PCPs often are in need of referral sources for their patients. It might as well be you. Also in the book is an example of a release of information between therapist and any other stated entity (see book, chapter 5). These contacts are a professional and ethical responsibility, and they provide conduits to help you market your practice.

When the referral is from a physician, a thank you letter with your well-written brochure or business card is sent, along with basic clinical information for the patient’s chart. A follow up call to discuss the client is good for coordination of treatment and also a way for the physician to hear, or maybe see, how good a counselor you are. Take opportunities to drop off fruit or lunch to the staff; they work hard. You will be on their minds whenever one of the patients needs a referral to a counselor.

If the client is a student and has an educational issue, it is an excellent idea to call the counselor, social worker, or special education coordinator at the school to ask for input in your treatment planning. I even ask the student's family to invite me to the student's individual education plan (IEP) or annual review. At these meetings I act as an observer, giving input only when asked. Leaving your brochure or card is almost always welcome. Schools look for competent counselors when they wish to refer outside the district. Most schools have a list of good counselors; you want to be on that list. Introducing yourself to the schools may earn you an invitation as a speaker at teacher institutes, PTA meetings, or district parent education fairs. I've even been asked to keynote the beginning-of-the-year teacher gathering. I've had teachers from these districts contact me for personal and marital counseling. If the school refers a student with medical issues, and the family has signed the coordination of treatment document, it is wise to contact the physician with a letter or call. This is a courtesy contact to let the doctor know how you are helping their patient with ADD, anxiety, or other mental health issues.

If your niche is working with adults, obtain client permission to contact the internist, gynecologist or other specialist. The fear that we are irritating the doctor is usually unfounded. Doctors spend an average of seven minutes with patients. Most MD's welcome a therapist ally. Once again, when another of their patients needs a therapist, you the competent professional, will come to mind. Visiting your clients who have been hospitalized by a psychiatrist is a thoughtful and professional gesture. Most MD's will write orders in the patient's chart that allow the outside therapist to visit. When signing in at the front desk, ask if you can drop off your cards or your brochure. We have had many clients referred to us upon discharge from the hospital for outpatient treatment because the personnel at the hospital saw that we were competent and professional.

When you have a referral from a friend of the client or a managed care company or EAP, use "cross pollination." Make sure you coordinate with physicians, schools, and even lawyers if it is appropriate. Keep in mind that ethics require you to always have a client release.

The goal of marketing is to help people as well as build your practice. A small, limited practice can grow fairly rapidly using the cross-pollination method of marketing. One of the most encouraging comments I ever received was when a new client said, "I was given your name by our school and the next day our pediatrician gave us your card, and with those two referrals we feel pretty good about coming to see you."

For this and more marketing and advertising ideas, please see *The Complete Guide to Private Practice for Licensed Mental Health Professionals* by Walsh and Dasenbrook, available online at [Counseling-Privatepractice.com](http://Counseling-Privatepractice.com). This information provided is for reference and does not constitute rendering of legal advice by Norman C. Dasenbrook, Robert Walsh, or ACA.

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