

Building Your Private Practice

Contributed by Keisha Cox, LCSW, MS

When I was in graduate school, I remember a number of students who had plans to begin private practice right after graduation. I myself was intimidated by the idea, because I realized that private practice was a business venture, and graduate school did not prepare me for that aspect of social work practice. After gaining some years of experience under my belt and conducting much research about the business aspects of private practice, I felt confident to venture into this territory of social work, but not without first taking the following steps. {mosgoogle right}

Establish Professional Supports

Social workers who move from agency life to private practice gain the benefits of autonomy but lose the benefits of peer support unless they become connected with networks in the community. They can gain support by joining and participating in professional organizations, joining and participating in community organizations, or taking continuing education courses. In addition to joining a group, you may want to consider starting your own peer group with other social workers who share similar interests. Being part of a group will not only help you gain peer supports in the community, but it will also help you to establish a network for referrals and to keep up to date with developments and opportunities within your profession.

Create a Practice Design

Before you begin recruiting potential clients, you must create a practice design. A practice design is a business plan for private practitioners. As a social worker venturing into private practice, you must ask yourself, "What type of clients do I want to work with?" Consider age, ethnicity, socio-economic background, and specific clinical/social issues when identifying the populations that you serve. You also need to determine where you want to practice. Consider immediate demographic populations, as well as convenience/accessibility to you and potential clients.

When creating a practice design, you must also consider how much time you have to commit to your practice, including office hours and time for administrative duties. This must be weighed against how much you expect to earn and how much you can afford to spend. Take into consideration the number of clients you want to treat, as well as current insurance rates, private pay rates, and sliding scale fees, in addition to expenses such as office space, office furniture/supplies, telephone, Internet, marketing material, malpractice insurance, liability insurance, and so forth.

Create a Professional Profile

In addition to a practice design, you should also create a professional profile. A professional profile is similar to a résumé or a curriculum vitae, but it is much more detailed, personal, and it is written in a narrative format. This profile includes information such as:

- Your name
- Current position
- Past education
- Work experience
- Professional affiliations
- Treatment approach
- Professional goals
- Areas of special interest
- What makes you unique

When creating a professional profile, it is best to include as much information as possible, as it is always easier to cut down on information when needed than it is to re-write or add more details to your profile. Once your profile is created, you will have your blueprint for marketing your private practice. The following are tools/tips for marketing your practice.

Brochures and Other Promotional Materials

Brochures are an attractive way to publicize what you do. Use your professional profile to create brochures about your practice. When designing your brochure, remember to be creative, as it is your means to attracting the attention of potential clients/referral sources. The brochure should not be just a repeat of your professional profile, but also a source of information for the user so that he or she is inclined to read it, keep it, and even pass it along. For example, if you are practicing as a behavioral therapist, then your brochure should provide information about behavioral therapy or how behavioral therapy can help people with their problems, in addition to your qualifications as a behavioral therapist. Also, it may be helpful to have more than one type of brochure targeted toward different audiences with specific information such as "Living with Bipolar Disorder."

Business cards are another basic marketing tool and an essential for anyone in private practice. They are the least expensive to print and the easiest to distribute. However, many people don't know how to make the best use of

business cards. Most business cards include basic contact information, but because business cards are the most distributed and often the only marketing tool used, they should provide a snapshot of your practice. The following is a list of important information to include on your business cards:

- Name
- Qualifications
- Address
- Phone number
- E-mail address
- Website
- Services offered
- Logos
- Quotes

It is important to have a marketing image, so that people remember you. Other materials, such as your Web site, letterhead, note cards, and envelopes, should be coordinated to have the same look as your business cards and brochures. We'll discuss those in more detail later.

Marketing Letters/Direct Mail

In my opinion, your practice does not exist if people do not know about it. You must get the word out. I would start by creating a marketing letter that will be sent out to potential referral sources, such as medical offices, churches, schools, community programs, and so forth. When selecting potential referral sources, it is easiest and most effective to start with providers in your immediate geographic location before branching out further. The letter should introduce yourself, explain about your practice, and attempt to establish a reciprocal relationship. By reciprocal relationship, I mean that you should offer a service in exchange for referrals. The service must be something that is easy for you to provide, so that you do not exhaust your physical and financial resources. Some examples of reciprocal services are:

- Free telephone consultations
- Referrals to their service
- A brief workshop or in-service
- Written material on a topic of interest

The marketing letter should be accompanied by brochures and business cards for distribution and can be followed by other forms of direct mail. Examples of other forms of direct mail are:

- Updates about changes to your practice (i.e., being added to an insurance panel)
- Holiday cards
- Written information/publications (either written by you or articles that you find that may be of interest to them)

Establishing Community Linkages

Although marketing letters and direct mail are important, they cannot stand alone. They serve as introductions to your practice, but are most effective when they are followed up by a phone call or visit. It is extremely important to contact potential providers by phone or in person to establish a relationship with them. The call should be kept simple and informative, letting them know about your availability and offering your reciprocal service. Again, you should present yourself as a resource to your potential referral sources and offer to provide them with services such as telephone consultations, written material, and in-services or workshops.

Creative Use of Computers

In this day and age, the use of computers is essential to any business. Having an e-mail address and Web presence is as important as having business cards and brochures. There are many providers who will give you access to free e-mail, and some also offer a free Web page. Web hosting packages are also easily accessible and start with prices as low as \$2.99/month with easy do-it-yourself options. I am by no means a computer whiz and have been able to design some pretty acceptable Web sites. When designing your Web site, you should keep in mind the same basic information as you did when designing your brochure. The Web site must be attractive, user friendly, and it helps to include helpful resources such as mental health or therapy information, articles written by you, or links to other articles that will attract potential clients and referral sources. Your Web site should also include your professional profile, your contact information, and should be designed in a fashion similar to your brochures, business cards, and other materials. If this idea is completely overwhelming to you, you should check out some Web sites of other practitioners and find out who designed their sites. (It is often listed at the bottom of the Web page.) Consider investing a couple of hundred dollars with that Web designer.

Writing and Public Speaking

One of the keys to successful marketing is to make your name familiar by keeping your name in the public domain. You want to be known as the expert in one or two topics related to your mental health practice. This is known as your niche. Your niche should not limit the work you do, but identify you as an expert on a particular subject. When people think of your niche topic (or something related to it), you want them to think of you. The best way to do so is by writing and public speaking. These roles can be intimidating and are often careers themselves, but if planned correctly, they can be great ways to build your practice.

You can start by writing articles for local magazines or newspapers. The smaller periodicals are often looking for new ideas and topics that are of interest to the general population. You can also print your own brochure or newsletter that you distribute to local community health centers. Be sure to include your contact information.

You can also begin public speaking by contacting local social groups, churches, and schools and offering to do workshops on topics of interest, such as stress management, healthy relationships, handling peer pressure, and so forth. Again, it is helpful to provide resources that people will keep, use later, and/or pass along that also have your marketing message.

Press Releases

We often forget that good news is newsworthy. If you are planning any speaking engagements, notify the local media (newspaper, radio, television) and get the word out with a press release. Although media coverage should not be the reason why you do charitable work, there is no reason why you should not be acknowledged for any charitable work you do. For example, if you are conducting a toy drive, writing a press release can help support your cause as well as enhance your public image.

You can also create press releases about topics of public interest, such as the national suicide rate and your advice for living with depression. Another strategy for press releases is to respond to a topic already in the news, such as your experiences with teen violence in response to a school shooting. Be sure to include information about your practice, such as a brochure or professional profile, when submitting your release to the media.

You must approach your practice as a business, and businesses are responsive to their environments. It is not a process that you begin and then sit back and it magically replicates itself. Managing a private practice is an active process, and you must maintain a hands-on approach throughout the life of your practice. With that in mind, you must remember to periodically look over and possibly adjust your practice design, professional profile, marketing tools, and marketing strategies to maintain your private practice.

Keisha Cox, LCSW, MS, has been in practice as a clinical social worker since graduating from New York University's School of Social Work in 2002 and currently operates a private clinical practice in Mount Vernon, NY. She has postgraduate training in loss and bereavement and in child and adolescent psychotherapy, in addition to more than 10 years of experience in the fields of mental health and substance abuse. Ms. Cox also has an MS in management from the Robert Wagner School of Public Service and is experienced in fundraising, marketing, event planning, program evaluation, program development, and as a social work manager. Ms. Cox is the founding and coordinating clinician of Community Counseling, a consulting firm that establishes linkages between mental health providers and members of the community.