

About Natural Touch Marketing:
An interview with bodyworker Jennifer Hathaway
by Eileen Ryan, June 2007

...You need to get an idea of what kind of client will bring out the best in you.

Have a grasp on what your clients are looking for. You have skill, passion and talent, but you really need to get an idea of what kind of client will bring out the best in you.

In the beginning, we are all worried that no one is going to like us. Possibly. Not everybody is going to like you or the work you do. But be professional, be ethical, and your client group, the people you want to have as clients, are going to stick around.

I tell students to be yourself. You don't have to act. Clients are coming to see you. They are coming for your services. Both you and your services are wrapped together and you can't really separate one from the other.

“You can't work with “everybody.”

In my classes we talk a lot about your “Target Market” which sounds kind of hard core. Really it's about how you need to create the working environment you want to be in. I ask my students: Who do you want to work with? The usual answer is, “Everybody.”

You need to think about this. You can't work with “everybody.” And I don't think you'd want to work with “everybody.” That would be spreading yourself too thin and you'd end up running a pretty inefficient practice. You need to figure out, you need to “target” who you're going to concentrate on.

I learned how to narrow a target market down to three groups from Cherie Sohnen-Moe. (Most of my business class is based on Cherie's book, Business Mastery.) She says to: 1) pick an easy target market, 2) pick the sort of people you really want to work with, and 3) pick a more challenging goal that you can work towards.

For me, my easy target market is the people I met through my previous jobs and the business group I belonged to. The population I really want to work with is athletes. My challenging goal right now is to get solidly involved in racing events. I'm so excited to get a sports massage team out there working on competition participants. I've contacted ten race directors and only one is working with me. So far. The plan isn't going quite the way I wanted, but I'm still trying. It's important enough to me that I'm sticking with it.

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I went to college to be an athletic trainer. I've been an athlete my whole life and those are the people I wanted to work with. But when I graduated, I ended up taking a year off to figure out how being an athletic trainer was actually going to support me. I had friends who had also gotten their degree in athletic training and a lot of them had gone back to school for massage

training. “Hmm...” I said and started examining the possibility of a massage career seriously. In the end I figured in a massage practice I’d be warm, dry, out of the weather and not doing 5 a.m. practices. And if I focused my practice on athletes, I’d still be working with population I want.

After college and before I went back to school for massage, I started working at a YMCA. It was a decent job in the fitness center as a personal trainer and then as a fitness training coordinator. I kept this job during the entire time I was in massage school. All of my clients at the Y knew I was studying to become an LMT, so they were always asking where I was in the program and what I was working on. At the time, the Y didn’t have uniform policy, so I wore my massage school shirt to generate questions.

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Once I got my license, I had to work hard to convince the Y management to let me introduce massage at the facility. No one there really knew what the benefits of massage were or how a session worked. As a trial run, they gave me space in the daycare area. The only thing to separate my clients from the daycare were a couple of screens and I could only schedule a session from 12-5 p.m. I did maybe five massages in 3 months.

Finally, after another round of discussions, the Y gave me a maintenance closet that barely had enough room to give a massage without hurting myself. But it was a room!

It was my job to come up with a marketing plan and to advertise myself. I did advertise in the Y brochure but there was not a lot of space to promote myself properly. Coupons worked well, though, and I set up a chair during health fairs.

Ultimately, I worked at the Y for a little more than seven years, five as an LMT. I would have been happy to make a career there, but I kept meeting with resistance. I spent a lot of time showing the business office that the facility would make money if they would make room in the budget and at the facility for massage. They weren’t hearing it. The turning point with the Y was the “not in the budget” answer I was getting all the time. I felt stuck.

I took a deep breath and walked away...

So I took a deep breath and walked away from full time job and retirement and insurance. Even though I left the Y on good terms, it wasn’t easy. But it was very worth it.

That was seven years ago. I walked out of the Y and opened my own practice. My space went from a 6’x10’ room to a 1000 square feet with three treatment rooms and eight therapists. It was the best decision I ever made, and it scared the hell out of me. I had left my job safety net and had a lot of things to learn about on the fly. The day I went in to sign my lease, the portents were not good. There was a fire scare near the building I was going to lease and really bad snowstorms.

Anyway, there I was, flying by seat of my pants. Now what? I decided that my whole focus for the first four years was to get myself known.

I had already priced out ValPac coupons when I was at the Y. I knew the rates and what kind of returns to expect so that was the first thing I did. It worked fairly well, but it wasn't enough.

I learned to listen closely to what people were saying...

One of my clients had introduced me to a networking organization. I had NO idea what a networking organization was. It sounded kind of odd and a little intimidating; I wasn't ready to talk about myself. But three months after I opened my business, I ended up joining the Leads Group. I found myself surrounded with people who were building their businesses and could help me build mine.

So there I was, selling my personality while I was selling massage. Every week, every member of the group would stand up and give a sixty second commercial on their business. It was a little nerve-wracking at first. Very few people are comfortable with that sort of thing, BUT I had a captive audience and a lot of chances to practice.

I also learned to listen closely to what people in the group were saying when they weren't talking business. Every 3 months, I got to give a longer presentation on my business, so I would tailor that presentation according to what people in the group were saying about themselves.

Maybe there was some aspect of my business that nobody "got," so I would speak about chronic pain or the benefits of regular massage. Sometimes there was a period where a lot of people would mention how sore they were, so I would give a presentation on stretching. Or I would address a topic that had to do with the season. For Christmas, I would talk about reducing stress and work my way around to mentioning I had gift certificates available. I didn't have to "sell" to get people in this group to come see me or to tell their friends about me, I just had to tell people who I was, what I had to offer and how my work could help them.

I also met a publicist through the networking organization whom I hired. She got articles about my business in the papers and organized filming for TV spots and all sorts of things.

I get very frustrated when I see specials advertised for new customers only.

With the clients I brought from my days at the Y and the people I met through the Leads Group, I formed relationships that last today.

The client base I have is my business's greatest strength and best marketing tool. People spend so much time worrying about how to get new clients in the door. Gathering new clients and treating them well is important, but don't forget about you current client base. They are your VIPs. They pay your rent and put gas in your car. The past two or three years, I've focused on marketing primarily to them.

I get very frustrated when I see specials advertised for new customers only. Sometimes I'll run specials just for VIPs. Or send special offers for birthdays or referral rewards.

To keep in contact with all my clients, I send out newsletters. I try to get a newsletter out once a quarter. The purpose of the letters is to keep top-of-the-mind awareness — especially for clients that are flying below the radar. I've learned it's best to keep the newsletters educational and focus on the latest research. It's also important to pay attention to what clients are talking about

and to be aware of the season, then you can send out articles inspired by those. Just keep things simple and short so it doesn't become junk mail.

Coupons are always good to prompt people to come in. Maybe they were going to come in for work eventually but now they are here sooner. Because I focus my personal work on athletes, I've done t-shirts and water bottles which appeal to that group. My friends make fun of me because I am very methodical; I research something and sit with it a while to figure out if that's going to work for me.

One of the ideas I like best is an adaptation of an American Airlines campaign...

Get away from spending what I call "stupid dollars;" when you're just throwing money out there, blindly hoping to get anyone in your studio. Again, think about whom you are trying to attract and focus energy and your marketing budget on them. What resources do you have? Find a tool that matches those resources. Look for the deals. Shop.

Paying attention to other ads and looking for images that caught my attention turned out to be incredibly helpful. Big businesses have already paid millions of bucks to develop a good way to get their customers' attention. Why shouldn't I simply adjust their campaigns to meet my massage business?

One of the ideas I like the best is my business's "Frequently Kneaded Club." It's an adaptation of an idea from of American Airlines, like a frequent flyer's club. After a client receives X number of massages, they get a complimentary massage. This is a fair way to reward regular customers without penalizing them for not being able to spend a chunk of cash to buy a package up front.

Students are very focused on tests and haven't examined what it takes to start up a practice...

Another huge thing happened when I opened my business seven years ago. The local massage school contacted me and invited me to teach sports massage. That segued into co-teaching the professional development course that is based on Cherie Sohnen-Moe's Business Mastery. It's been a blast.

I think my students are apprehensive about confronting the "real world." They are very focused on taking tests and haven't truly examined what it takes to start up a practice. It generally isn't as easy as they think. There are three pages of massage therapists listed in the local phone book. Students need to be aware of what kind of competition they're up against. So I spend a lot of time demonstrating the reality of starting up a business and running numbers and things like that.

Making a business plan is HUGE. You have to have one. Write it down. Keep it near you. Go back to it frequently. Make changes as you develop more experience and knowledge. I had to make a business plan in massage school. When I unearthed it several years after graduation, there it was — a plan to own my own business after four years. I was only off by a year. Kind of remarkable.

A marketing plan is important...

The other thing I feel is important is a marketing plan. I'm currently working on developing one for my class. We talk about business goals a lot, but what my students need is a guide just like a business plan. They need to map out their marketing plan and think how they are going to achieve their business goals. I do challenge them to examine this stuff in depth. They need to know the difference between publicity and promotion. What are the actual costs? How are you going to test it? How are you going to track it? Why do you think this is a good idea? A lot of them think that word-of-mouth is going to carry their business and make it grow quickly. Well, maybe, if that word-of-mouth is coming from your mouth. You need to sell yourself.

My class concentrates on teaching ways for students to get out in the community and get talking about themselves and their practice. (Again, you can't separate your personality from your business.) Talking to people, public speaking can be scary. Mostly the scariness is caused by a lack of confidence. Put on your game face and practice, practice, practice.

When you take the time to market, you still have an impact even when your clients are not in your office.

Building a practice is a lot of hard work, as I keep saying. But it's good work. To have a good career in massage you have to set time aside to market and promote yourself, just like you need to set aside time to keep your notes and filing up to date. It takes time and energy to get clients on your table. When you take the time to market, you still have an impact even when your clients are not in your office. Get out, do events, write an article. Your clients — and potential clients — need to be exposed to you in so many different ways.

Surround yourself with people you WANT to be with. If there's a situation you don't like, change it. Above all, don't be afraid to try.