

("Population 9000 ... bodyworkers 19.")

The driving challenge for my business in Sitka, AK, is a population of 9000 with 19 bodyworkers. While the number of potential customers is fixed, the number of bodyworkers has probably doubled since I opened my studio. Finding a way to get people to come to me has taken and continues to take creativity and persistence.

I live on an island in Southeast Alaska called Sitka. We are surrounded by 17 million acres of trees, the world's largest temperate forest. I went into massage therapy after receiving a lot of bodywork over the years for my own health concerns and, after a while, being a massage practitioner seemed to be a good fit for my lifestyle. Before we get rolling here, I want to take some time to thank my husband, Hugh, for all his encouragement and support during my training and especially as I've built my business.

("Planning has given me more focus and direction in operating my business.")  
When I started, I shared a one room studio with another bodyworker part time. In less than 8 months my business doubled and I found myself needing my own studio to accommodate more customers on a full time basis. It was during this growth spurt that a friend of mine with a background in marketing sat down with me. We drew up one year and three year business plans. This planning has given me more focus and direction in operating my small business. I continuously check in to see what's working and what needs adjusting. The plans have changed very little over the years – much to my surprise.

("It's pretty clear when you're on the right track.")

I have to market constantly. Because there's only so many people on Sitka, it's in my best interests to consistently remind businesses and customers I am here and ready to work with them. The good thing is when you do it right you see returns fairly quickly, so it's pretty clear when you're on the right track. I did a lot of reading about marketing in books and trade magazines and brainstormed ideas with Hugh. I worked incrementally on building my business, from my studio's environment to personalizing each customer's experience. The most basic thing I've learned is that simple, personal approaches work best.

In the beginning I was very careful to make sure that my studio and all of my cards and stationary reflected my business personality and coordinated with each other. I focused on creating and projecting a safe and welcome business personality in everything. It was not difficult for me to find the balance of professional personality and being welcoming at the same time. One of the ways I get my business personality across is to be very consistent in every piece of information I have out there. My logo is on every flyer, letter and business card. The colors on my business cards are the same colors you'll see on my brochures, stationary and business signs.

("Often, a card or flyer is the first contact someone will have with me. ")  
You really do have to take a look at where your time and energy is going to have the biggest impact; how you are going to get your name out there. Often, a card or flyer is the first contact someone will have with me. Because of this, I have chosen to focus a larger portion of my marketing budget on quality material and products. The only business to business trade I do is with a friend who, with my consultation, formats and prints my cards and brochures.

("Take what you do seriously")  
All of the things I do to market myself have been addressed in every single trade magazine. Really, folks, this is a business. Take what you do seriously. People aren't just going to show up at your door.

The #1 thing is to have a plan and revisit it regularly. Keep things simple. Work out what your business identity is and create or gather material that expresses who you are.

("Start focusing on your 'perfect customer.' ")  
Take a good look at the local population and location you are working in. Who do you want to attract? Obviously, in the beginning working with as many people as you can is good. Then, as your path becomes clearer, start focusing on the kind of customers you want to work with: your "perfect customer." Think about how you should talk with your "perfect customer? What problems does your "perfect customer" have (stress, pain, etc.) and how you can help them? What words do they need to hear (relax, pain-free, mini vacation) that would prompt them to get in your studio and on your table?

Track the best return on your time and energy. You read that advice all the time, everywhere. It really does make a difference. Otherwise you're just throwing money away without knowing if you are having any effect or not.

("What makes me loyal to a business is personal attention.")  
When I was starting my business, my budget was very tight. It still is. I know I'm not unique in this. I determined what makes me loyal to a business is personal attention; being treated as an individual. The simple idea of reaching out to *my* customers in a natural way has proved to be not only a great way of extending my care out from my studio but is also the most cost effective. And with my limited budget, "cost effective, high response" is a huge consideration.

("Everyone everywhere likes to be recognized and rewarded.")  
As I said earlier, the most useful thing I've learned about marketing is to keep it simple and personal. Everyone everywhere likes to be recognized and rewarded.

So go ahead and do it. Sending a card or letter is a gentle way to remind a customer that you are there for them.

Every one of my customers gets a birthday card from me. It *is* their special day, after all and it's good to acknowledge it. I'm sure to send it out a month before their birthday. Why so far ahead? I've found a lot of the people who get the cards, hand them over to their spouse or friends and say, "This is what I want for my birthday." If they book far enough ahead, they can even have a session with me ON their birthday which makes their day that much better.

("My customers do a lot of work for me.")

I always make a point of asking how people find or hear about me. I want to know how my marketing is working. Most visitors to Sitka find me on the web. Being involved with a community organization with a website has worked out well for me. Overall, though, local word of mouth has been especially effective for my business. My customers do a lot of work for me. They feel pretty special when I tell them when someone they've recommended to me schedules some time on my table. I usually reward my "referees" with extra time on the table (people REALLY like that) and I also send them thank you cards.

("Information in the brochures gets people thinking about their health and well-being.")

Taking personalizing one step further, I send brochures to people who are new to massage and bodywork. I put brochures in the rack outside my studio door so people can grab them as they go down the hall. (I find myself refilling the display daily; it's worth it.) The information in the brochures gets people thinking about their health in relation to the care I can provide them. Then *they* willingly call *me* with questions. This gives me yet another chance to give folks a dose of my business personality. I also give brochures to business owners or health care workers who are in the position to send customers my way.

("People are hungry for information.")

Encouraging my customers to learn more about what add-on services I offer and how bodywork can benefit them has helped me create a solid customer base. Sometimes people have questions about experiences during a session. For those who want more information, I have a lending library with books, articles, brochures and DVDs. They all open up more conversation about what can help and what customers have experienced on the table. People are hungry for information. Published information is a validation for what they experienced under my care.

("An opportunity for me to work with and introduce myself to a lot of people.")

Starting out, I had to get people to know ME. I did a lot of chair work at health fairs and community events like Christmas bazaars. This gave me an opportunity

to work with and introduce myself to a lot of people. I made sure each person who sat in my chair got my business card as well as a brochure on whatever modality or condition would best address their needs.

I also offered free chair massage to staff in our school district. It was my way of thanking them for working with our youth. I always provided educational brochures on conditions (like repetitive stress, stress relief, headache relief) and a promotional coupon for their first visit session with me. I left some of the coupons on the table in the staff lounge, too. The program was very well appreciated, I felt like I was doing good work for the community and I benefited with new customers as well.

Speaking of community, use yours. It is amazing how many potential customers call me because they saw a simple flyer of mine on the coffee shop or grocery store bulletin boards.

("During my first season, visitors were the bulk of the people I served.")  
Another population I work with in Sitka is the tourist community. Tourist season is from May through September with two to four ships each day. I get independent tourists and both visitors and crew members from cruise ships. During my first season these visitors were the bulk of the people I served. Most of them found me because I was on the main street of the downtown business district. It's funny, tourists read every single sign on every single door. They found my stairs up to the second floor and walked right in. I had more availability because I was just starting out. They also would see my flyers around town—especially in the coffee shops.

The next year, the crew staff would return. I suggested these folks email me at least a week ahead of time for the next season so I would be able to schedule them. As time went by, they would tell other staff members and friends. Once again, word of mouth. Some fun surprises are independent travelers are also starting to email ahead and book appointments. This is new and it's great!

("I send a letter to each business owner")  
Another way I've marketed my practice is with a yearly mailing to all the service oriented and tourist businesses on the island. I send a letter to each business owner, along with brochures and business cards, reminding them I am here to help enhance their customers' experiences. In the letter, I tell them I'll be calling in a week to answer any questions about what I do and how I work. Then I DO call. Following up is really important. One of the things I've learned the hard way is to remind the owners that I book a week out. I encourage owners to tell their visitors about me as reservations are made. That way the visitors can book in advance with me and everyone is happy.

Truth to tell, over the past couple years my regular customers have me booked pretty solidly so I've had to pass a lot of visitors on to other therapists.

("I have a clearer idea of who I want to serve.")

After four years of building a solid customer base, I have a clearer idea of who I want to serve. In the near future I'll be acquiring new certifications and different modalities.

I want to reach out more to the medical community in Sitka. I would love to be involved in long term care. There is a real advantage to working at events like health fairs as it gives me a chance to make connections with other health providers. Becoming one of the medical community's trusted sources of information on bodywork would make my business even more viable. I am already exploring ways I can develop this opportunity, and I am in a strong position to do it. That comes from reaching out to many, many people over the past few years.

("The words of thanks I receive are heartwarming.")

My success also comes from supporting my customers on their road to health and wellness. The voicemails and words of thanks I receive are heartwarming. They tell me I'm taking my business in a good direction. I look forward to what the future will bring.