



Marketing to Men

By Daryl Kulak



Bodywork is good for everyone. So why do bodyworkers have mostly women as clients? Where are the men?

In this edition of Business Side, I'd like to explore these questions: How can bodyworkers effectively market to men? What attracts a man to become a regular client of bodywork? How can a therapist create word-of-mouth advertising among men?

The Challenge

My informal surveys with massage therapists indicate that many practices have fewer than 20 percent male clients. The number is higher for more accessible bodywork styles, like Swedish massage and sports massage, and much lower for less well-known practices, like energy work, chakra healing, and reiki.

The men who do frequent holistic health practices tend to fit into one of three categories:

- Ex-hippies who still feel connected to the 1960s counterculture and who are unafraid to try something different.
- Metrosexual men who live in metropolitan areas and aren't hesitant about getting manicures, pedicures, facials, or taking care of their looks and health (think *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*).

- Men with a difficult physical or emotional malady who've tried all the Western medical solutions and found them lacking.

Massage therapists I've talked to feel men are generally not as open to new healing practices as women. Women tend to judge less and be more intrigued by the subtle and the unique.

There are other factors. Men's beliefs tend to be lodged in Newtonian science and less in spirituality. Since many alternative medical practices straddle the line between science and spirituality, some men may view them suspiciously.

In families, the wives are often responsible for the well-being of the children, themselves, and sometimes even their husbands. They make most of the health decisions in the family, they do most of the research, and they decide whether to use alternative medicine or standard Western practices.

So what can bodyworkers do to attract male clients into their practices? Let's look at three necessary elements.

Set Your Intent

Examine your intent closely. Do you really, in your heart, want to work on men? Intent is so powerful it can quickly create a reality that is either what you want

or not, depending on whether you are focusing on the positive or the negative. If you find you focus on what is bad about men, then it is likely that men will either not show up in your practice or, when they do, they will personify the negative impressions you may already have.

"I had to look closely at what I was saying about men," says Tisa McGraw, a massage therapist in Mount Vernon, Ohio. "Sometimes I would say, 'Oh, you know what men are like!' or 'Men are terrible.' With that attitude, no wonder men weren't attracted energetically into my practice."

McGraw's business has made a complete switch in the last few years. First, she didn't have enough male clientele; now, half of her clients are men.

"I had issues to work through, from childhood sexual abuse and a failed marriage," McGraw says. "I was carrying over those feelings to my clients, and prospective clients, and subconsciously, they could tell. But once I addressed my own issues, I realized I loved working on men."

Laurel Finch, neuromuscular massage therapist and owner of Massage Therapy Associates in Yellow Springs, Ohio, agrees, "There was a point early in my practice where I had no men in my practice, only women. But later, once I did my own groundwork relating back to my childhood, the situation turned around completely. Now, I have a very busy practice with as many men as women."

McGraw and Finch both suffered sexual abuse as children, which gave them a poisoned view of men early on. However, the same process of intent is necessary with male therapists. John McMullin, Holistic Coach and owner of Journeys of Wisdom says he's had to work through his own issues of fear and trust before his practice really started thriving and attracting a representative number of men.

"Pain is stuck energy," McMullin says. "Men have been taught from childhood to hold in their emotions and even their physical pain. If they don't, they're subjected to the taunts of the schoolyard bully. So, as therapists, it's our job to help them move into that pain again and help them resolve it. It's hard for us to do that until we've done work on ourselves."

Focus on Word of Mouth

What gets men actively referring other men into a bodywork practice? You might be surprised at the answers coming from successful therapists.

Invite and Listen. Bodywork often brings up tough emotional issues. Emotions can be tied up in a part of the body, and when the bodyworker touches that area, the emotion can come flooding back. How the bodyworker handles that situation with a male client can be a major factor on the referrals coming later.

"Invite the client to talk," McGraw says. "People think men don't like to talk about their feelings, but that has not been my experience. When a man experiences emotion on the table, I ask him if he wants to talk about it. Then, I stay quiet. Sometimes, he just wants to brush it off and forget about it. But most of the time, he will talk about the underlying emotion and express it to me. I'm not a

psychotherapist, so I cannot advise him, but I can be there to witness his pain and to listen to him. I've found that men really, really appreciate that. In many referrals, when I've asked why the man came in, they say, 'I heard you're good at what you do, and that you're easy to talk to.'"

Good listening means not judging. "Some of my clients are hunters, and they enjoy talking about their hunting expeditions. At first, I was horrified. 'They're killing animals,' I thought. But then, I settled back into a position of nonjudgment, and I noticed that everything about their hunting trips was based on tradition. Once I realized that, I found I could really respect the tradition of what they were doing."

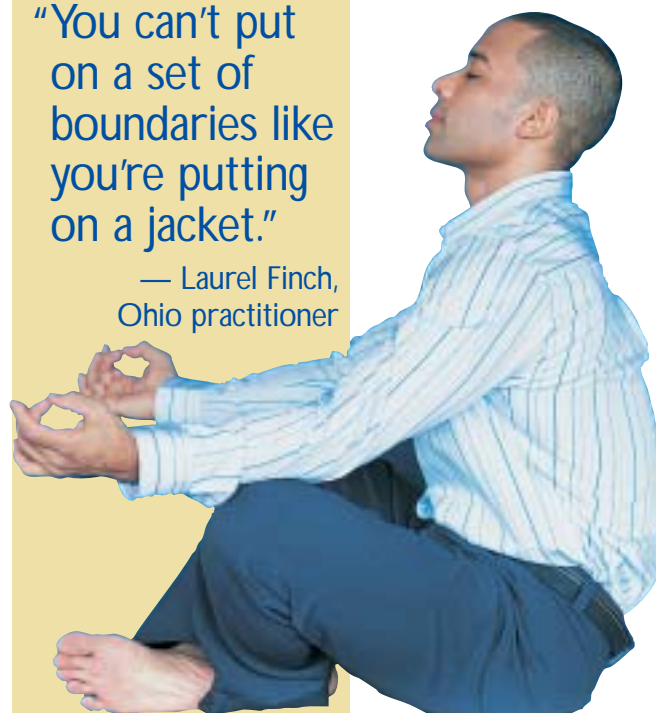
Look for the genius in the client. Find what you can respect and admire in what the person is saying. Men aren't looking for someone to cry with them; they're often just looking for someone who will listen and not judge. And, again, don't advise them in any emotional matters unless you are a psychotherapist or counselor, and then make sure you're doing so outside the realm of massage.

Create Safety. Another major factor in building a reputation with male clientele is creating safety for the client. This security does not mean that your client is necessarily worried you might attack them or hurt their muscles when you're massaging them. It's much more subtle. A male client feels a sense of safety when they know their therapist will handle any situation professionally and confidently. Female therapists particularly need to project a strong sense of confidence to every male client to create this sense of safety.

For instance, the male client wants to sense that the female therapist has a strong set of sexual boundaries. If the female therapist gives confusing signals, that makes for a very uncomfortable situation for the male client. A firm handshake, a professional uniform, and clear

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— Laurel Finch,
Ohio practitioner



communication in a friendly, nonsexual way will reinforce that sense of safety for the man, and he'll be more likely to return for a second appointment.

Maintaining proper ethical conduct is particularly important for younger, female therapists. "Younger women are wired to attract men," Finch says. "They have to expend the most effort to remain professional and keep everything on a therapeutic level. And it's not enough to say 'I have a set of boundaries.' You have to have done your emotional groundwork to have resolved your issues with men before you walk into the therapy room. You can't put on a set of boundaries like you're putting on a jacket.

"My advice is for every young female therapist to find an older female mentor who can help them maintain a good therapeutic relationship with male clients. The pair can do 'fire drills' to practice what to do in certain situations. What if the client gets an erection? What if the conversation gets uncomfortable? Practicing these situations in a safe way can contribute greatly to that sense of confidence."

But boundaries aren't the same as barriers. Men won't come back to a therapist if they think the person is afraid or suspicious of them. The key is finding the middle ground between "no boundaries" and putting up barriers.

Another way to instill a sense of safety is to explain what you are doing as you work on the man's body. Many men enjoy technical talk, and they will like to hear the details of what you're doing to their muscles and the anticipated results. This talk reinforces the therapeutic relationship and gives them more information about the process.

A sense of safety for a male client means an unambiguously-therapeutic environment, a confident therapist, and a strong set of sexual boundaries. It also means that if emotional outbursts happen, the therapist will be caring and professional.

Problem-Oriented Marketing

Until now, we've talked about how you can adapt your practice to supercharge word-of-mouth advertising among your male clients. But, as you know, marketing is more than just word of mouth. How can you change your advertising, speaking, writing, and networking to attract more male clients into your practice?

In the Business Side column from the June/July 2004 issue of *Massage & Bodywork* ("The Few, Not the Crowd: How Specialization Makes Marketing Easier," page 132), I emphasized that your practice needs to portray a focused

image to the public. If you claim to solve every problem with your bodywork approach, you will appeal to no one. But if you hone in on solving a specific problem for a specific group, you'll have much more success in your marketing. I also discussed how speaking, publishing, and networking are the most important marketing techniques for a bodyworker. Advertising is part of the picture, but the other three must always come first.

As it turns out, this approach to focusing your marketing works well to attract men, too. Men are very pragmatic about their health. They tend to go to a doctor or a holistic health

practitioner when they have a specific

issue they want to resolve. They are less likely to come in for checkups, tuneups, or exploration.

If your marketing hones in on a specific target, the percentage of men in your practice will increase. I know it's paradoxical that as you narrow the focus of your practice, your client list increases. But it's true. In fact, I believe it will be a major leap for holistic healthcare once more and more practitioners take this approach to their marketing. This approach means instead of doing a speech in front of a group on "The Benefits of Neuromuscular Massage," the therapist will speak on "Tingling and Numbness in the Arms."

The reason this strategy works so well is simple. Change the perspective to an area where you are not an expert, and it will become more clear. Let's use finance as an example.

Compare your own attraction to these two speaking topics: "The Benefits of Municipal Bonds" or "Reducing Your Tax Burden When Investing." The first topic is solution-oriented, the second is problem-oriented.

Problem-oriented marketing is always better than solution-oriented. This approach will get people in the room to listen to you speak, it will get people to read your articles, and it will encourage people to see you for an appointment.

Bringing more men into a bodywork practice isn't going to be easy, but with difficult, deep work inside yourself, and some changes to how you portray your business to others, it is possible and can be very fulfilling. **M&B**

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Identify which of these is a problem-oriented (good) or solution-oriented (bad) marketing statement:

- 1. The joy of acupressure
- 2. Reflections on yoga
- 3. Carpal tunnel syndrome
- 4. Gain structural integration for your body
- 5. Helping divorced parents and kids re-connect
- 6. Coping with chronic pain and fibromyalgia
- 7. Experience healing with tuning forks
- 8. The pains of the weekend warrior

Notice how each statement either provides a solution to some unknown problem or focuses in on problems that the specific group of people experience and relates to them in their own words (no holistic buzzwords).

Problem-oriented (good): 3, 5, 6, 8
 Solution-oriented (bad): 1, 2, 4, 7