

Going the Extra Mile: Adapting to Changes in the Marketplace

Joseph J. Sweere, DC, DABCO, DACBOH, FICC

During my classroom lectures to entering chiropractic students, I share a concept in physiology based on a conviction established within all of the biological sciences. It goes like this: "In chiropractic theory, there is only one cause of disease and death: the inability of an organism to adapt to its environment." Of course, the key word in this statement is *adapt*.

At Northwestern, we provide participants of our occupational health diplomate training classes with an outline of the five characteristics employers look for when choosing a team of professionals to address the health, safety and wellness needs of their workers. It is my firm conviction that these five traits - likability, credibility, availability, accessibility and affordability - will remain the core components of an effective strategy to actually thrive in the coming new health care marketplace.

Characteristics of an Employable Occupational Health Professional

Likability: As the term implies, any professional who expects to successfully market their services within the role of an occupational health consultant must consider the importance of this key personality trait. Friendliness, kindness, affability, consistency, cordiality, humility, confidence, helpfulness, trust and respect are some of the descriptive words that come to mind. It is important not only that business owners and upper management find you likable and pleasurable to work with, but also that you have the grace and professionalism middle management and especially the regular workers respect and enjoy being around.

One of the key elements of likability is your skill in allowing others to feel comfortable and at ease in your presence. Even though you may be the "expert," as a skilled consultant you will demonstrate likability by exhibiting the capability to listen carefully and allow others to help you find ways to be of maximum service to the individual or firm with whom you are working. This includes rendering full praise to others when successful outcomes are achieved. Likability also means engaging in full and caring eye contact, firm handshakes and your very best smile. Such simple measures can do wonders in establishing rapport and trust.

Credibility: In simple terms, this means having the technical skills and specialty knowledge base to "know what you are doing." It means you know what you are talking about and can deliver the goods. Don't try to be what you are not. Yield to others' greater expertise when indicated and appropriate.

Credibility also means that you are always on time, conduct yourself professionally, establish clear expectations and guidelines, communicate with timeliness, accuracy and authority, and follow through with absolute consistency. Maintain a "can-do" attitude and remember that it is always best to "under-promise and over-deliver." If you can accomplish this, you will attain the highest level of respect, gratitude and genuine, life-sustaining affection from those you serve.

Availability: Employers will carefully consider whether professionals they work with will be readily

available during times of need. This may not seem especially challenging in the traditional work setting that employs a single shift of workers; however, employers whose businesses operate on a three-shift, 24/7 schedule may pass you by if you convey to them that you may not relish the notion of providing worker education classes to their graveyard shift of workers. Obviously, doctors who have professional associates may be at an advantage under such circumstances.

Accessibility: The primary focus of accessibility is simple geographic convenience. Is your clinic or office within an acceptable distance from the business entity? On the plains of Wyoming, a distance of 30 or 40 miles may be considered reasonable. However, in the majority of metropolitan settings, distance is usually measured in minutes, and more than 15 minutes sitting in gridlock could be considered excessive when a worker/patient is in acute lower spinal pain and spasm.

Affordability: Especially during economically challenged times, you can be sure that employers will hold return-on-investment considerations of critical importance. You may recall that I have always advised against providing "free" occupational health/ergonomic services, and promoted the notion of establishing fair but reasonable professional fees. If you do engage in providing complimentary or free services, they will often be judged as having little or no value to the recipient, and will most often be interpreted as being solicitous of only acquiring "new patients" and therefore not genuinely driven by prevention motivation. Such behavior is always a major turnoff for employers.

Employers recognize that there is no such thing as a "free-lunch" and are willing to reimburse you according to your skill level and range of service capability, as they would for any other competent professional. But also keep in mind that it is better to secure the contract at a nominal fee than to lose it because the fees involved are deemed unreasonable. After you have achieved your expected outcomes and have exceeded the employer's expectations, you can always raise your fees when it comes time for contract renewal.

Occupational Health Services Remain in Great Demand

During economically depressed times, employers face enormous economic challenges and are often forced to engage in downsizing and worker layoffs. Almost always this means laying off the more recently hired, younger workers. Seasoned workers are usually highly skilled and well-conditioned for their jobs, which can be an advantage in terms of productivity and profits, but the downside of this equation is that the employer's work force is aging. This generally means that in proportion to the collective workers' age, they will be facing increased risks of failing health and performance with a net increase of health-related absenteeism and employer-based insurance costs and premium increases.

For this and likely many other reasons, not the least of which is the stress workers endure as the result of job insecurity, the opportunity for properly qualified occupational health and applied ergonomics remains very strong because the employer's needs for health, wellness and safety are greater than ever. Properly informed and motivated employers recognize that improved health, wellness and safety of their workers will invariably result in more productivity and profits, and therefore are of critical importance to their bottom line and continued competitive existence within the marketplace.

Remember, even though there are many individuals and business firms that will suffer and be forced to close their doors, millions of others will successfully adapt to the ever-changing circumstances and will survive these precarious times. Some who are willing to go the extra mile, are more efficient and skillful in the art of adaptation will likely even thrive during times of economic challenge.

To increase your likelihood of thriving during these challenging days, align yourself with like-minded employers. Keep in mind that your greatest opportunities lie in dealing with smaller and medium-size companies that lack the internal personnel who are critical to the implementation of health, wellness and safety initiatives. Share these concepts with such employers and work together to accomplish unprecedented occupational health and safety outcomes.

For a wide variety of resources to assist you with your interest in occupational health and applied ergonomics, contact the author at jsweere@nwhealth.edu or visit the International Academy of Chiropractic Occupational Health Consultants (IACOHC) Web site: www.dc-occhealth-org.com.

JUNE 2009