

Finding Your Niche

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Picture this: You're up to bat in the deciding game of the World Series, and you must hit a home run to win. Four pitchers start their windups simultaneously on the mound, and four baseballs whiz toward you.

How will you hit that home run? Your plan is to concentrate on slugging only one of those four baseballs. You focus on one ball, swing and get a solid hit. As you lope around the bases, you watch it fly out of the park. Your team wins the Series!

I've just described a player who is a winner; I've also described two essential elements of niche marketing: planning and focus.

Niche marketing is defined as, "The targeting of a product or service to a small portion of your total market opportunity." The key word in initiating this type of marketing is "plan." Even a minimal amount of planning will save you a much larger amount of problems. You may be a brilliant doctor, perhaps even possess a photographic memory, but your lens cap is still on if you start niche marketing without that simple four-letter word.

However, before you start planning, survey your community to determine if there's a need for your planned niche services. You can't make people use something they don't want, but you can encourage people to use something they perceive as special.

Discovering Your Niche

The expertise necessary for your chiropractic niche could be as close as your hobby. For example, in my off-hours, I race cars on road courses. Since I know what physical stresses a race car driver and members of his or her crew undergo, I naturally targeted my services toward that market.

Whatever interests you have outside of your office can provide an interesting niche for you to explore and determine if there is a need for your unique chiropractic expertise.

One of the keys to practice marketing success is to avoid overextending your feasible market parameters. In other words, you need to cut across numerous market segments and attempt to treat an excessive market area (such as the entire planet!). A course of action along those extreme lines reminds me of the bumper sticker that tells the driver of the car behind it, "Forget world peace! Visualize using your turn signal!"

It's difficult to build a strong practice by embracing an entire universe of patients. There are too many instances of wrecked practices that have failed because their owners attempted to be "chiropractors for all reasons." In the end, their services were so diluted that their efforts did little to influence the health of their communities.

Try this experiment: Press the eraser end of a pencil firmly into the palm of your hand, then turn that pencil around and press the lead tip into the palm of your hand. You'll immediately notice that when you focus the force, you increase the pressure.

Think of your hand as the market, and the pencil as your marketing efforts. Either your efforts are scattered (the eraser end) or focused (the lead end). It's that simple! So, you have to get the "lead" out and focus your efforts (sorry, I couldn't resist). Get the point?

Market Evaluation

Once you identify the niche you want to serve, it's wise to check out the stability and potential of that niche by performing a marketing evaluation. Some of the items you'll want to evaluate include:

- the available patient base;
- any competing or similar services;
- the stability of your intended market;
- what special services you'll be able to offer to your intended market; and
- the ability to operate profitably while servicing that niche.

The Internet is chock full of small-business marketing plans. For example, check out the U.S. Small Business Administration's Web site (www.sba.gov). It's one of the many Internet sites that contains excellent marketing plans.

Look at Both Sides of Your Niche

As I noted in the list above, one of the items you need to consider when evaluating the market is competing or similar services. Specifically, you need to determine how many other chiropractors are serving the same niche, and if your niche is over- or underserved.

For example, if your marketing plan includes opening a practice on the lava slopes of Mount Pinatubo (an active volcano), because it appears to be underserved, ask yourself, "Why?" The easy answer is that it's unrealistic to try and build a career practice on the slopes of an active volcano. There are times when the answers are not as apparent, so look carefully. The old axiom, "If it looks too good to be true, it probably is," still applies.

The bottom line is to always examine both sides of your information picture, and keep asking yourself, "What does this mean?"

When you decide to develop a niche practice, use the following steps to ease your journey:

1) Identify Your Target Segment

Gee, what a unique idea! Believe it or not, it's very easy to target an area that's too large. Instead of targeting "The factory workers of the East Coast," why not start with targeting "the factory workers in your town"?

Even better, consider targeting "the factory workers who are now doing what you once did." The grammar is poor, but the idea works. It's much easier to penetrate a market when you have a working knowledge of what goes on in that market.

When you start writing down the profile of your proposed niche, make certain you take a careful look at the physical size of the intended area (The typical chiropractic marketing area. is 3 - 6 miles and could be larger, depending on the drawing power of your specialty.) Remember, it has to be large enough to support your planned practice size but not consume all of your financial and physical resources as you attempt to provide service to that area.

The drain on your resources while trying to properly cover a large area would include such items

as advertising; long drive times to promote your practice; signage; extra staff; longer office hours; and wear and tear on your own energies.

2) List the Steps

Determine what route you must travel to adequately provide chiropractic services within your proposed niche market. If this route is not compatible with the mission of your practice, then you may want to re-evaluate your plans.

For example, if you decide to target chiropractic services toward all the baseball teams in your area; then you should plan to be busy both in and out of your office. You'll want to visit team workouts and games for observation and treatment follow-up, hold injury prevention clinics and perform team physicals.

3) Walk the Walk

If you're to serve a niche market, it helps if you understand how it functions and can talk the language of the patients in that market segment.

Consider the baseball example again: If you're going to offer your services to any type of competitive team, it would be downright handy to know something about how those teams function and perform within their sport. Whether baseball or motor sports, you should be able to speak the language and be aware of the physical stresses involved in that sport.

If you lack the experience needed to properly develop your chosen niche, see if additional training, experience or staff will place you in a better position to proceed.

4) Make a Decision

It will be to your benefit to decide on your marketing strategy as soon as possible! Niche marketing is steadily becoming an essential component of the success of the typical chiropractic practice. It is important that you decide your marketing strategy now, rather than later.

The reasons for deciding as soon as possible will become more apparent as the health care marketplace becomes more competitive.

Don't imitate the procrastinator who says, "If at first I don't succeed, there's always next year." Not likely! Next year, someone else will be providing his or her services to a niche you should have owned. You need to start today!

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APRIL 2003