

# Niche Marketing: Is It Right For Me?



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When first getting my private practice off the ground, I resisted the idea of niche marketing. I enjoy the broad scope of my practice, and imagined that niche marketing would restrict my practice to a particular problem or clientele. I also didn't see any advantage to niche marketing, and how it could help me to promote my practice. I thought I had everything to lose and nothing to gain. I now have a very different perspective on niche marketing that I'd like to share with you.

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First, let's define terms: niche marketing involves identifying a narrowly defined specialty, as opposed to characterizing your practice as a generalist one. Rather than broadly defining your market as including anyone with a pulse and a problem, in niche marketing you focus on a particular segment of the market. This could mean a particular population (senior citizens or teenage boys) or a particular focus (diabetes or shyness), or a combination of the two (e.g., diabetic teens, or shy young adults who want to date).

## **Debunking the Myths**

At first, I imagined that if I subscribed to niche marketing that my entire practice would be defined and circumscribed by the niche. In reality, a niche needn't be limiting. Most niches will draw clients who have a broad spectrum of problems. For example, an insomnia specialist's practice is likely to attract clients whose insomnia is secondary to depression, anxiety, medical problems and substance abuse. Furthermore, once a client has had some success in overcoming insomnia, she may then move on to tackle other problems. Consider your own caseload: do you have clients whose treatment has shifted from one focus to another? I dare say that this is not an uncommon pattern.

If a broad scope of practice is important to you, you might consider identifying two or three different niches which can be pursued simultaneously or sequentially. Many

clinicians change the focus of their practice over time, as their interests change. And you can always identify yours as a general practice with a specialty.

## **Why Consider a Niche?**

So even if you're now convinced that identifying a niche won't turn your practice into a homogeneous, monotonous bore, that still leaves us with the question: why bother? What does niche marketing have to offer?

In large part, niche marketing works because it's easier to engage people's interest regarding a specific topic. How many times have you told people what you do and found that the discussion fell flat, or drifted aimlessly? Compare the following two possible responses to the question "What do you do for a living?"

I'm a clinical social work psychotherapist. I help people with a variety of problems: depression, anxiety, relationship, work and career problems. I treat adults, children, couples, families, and groups.

I'm a clinical social work psychotherapist. I help people who are scared to fly on airplanes to overcome their fear of flying so they can go on honeymoons, vacations, family visits and business trips.

Which of these introductions do you imagine will elicit more interest from the listener?

Here's another possibility:

I'm a clinical social work psychotherapist. I help people who are nervous and worried to feel calmer and overcome their fears. For example, I help people who feel scared about flying on airplanes to overcome their fear of flying so they can go on honeymoons, vacations, family visits and business trips. I also help people who have phobias so their fears don't get in the way of achieving their goals; for example, I help people with a fear of small spaces so they can use the elevator to get to and from their work place or to complete an MRI exam recommended by their physician.

In this example, the clinician maintains a broad scope of practice (treating anxiety disorders) while also providing two specific, engaging examples.

These are examples of elevator introductions. The premise of an elevator introduction is to tell someone about your

**continued on page 14....**

# Niche Marketing, continued from page 13

practice in the time you'd have on an elevator ride. Ideally, your elevator introduction opens up a dialogue. When an elevator introduction targets a specialty, it's more likely to pique the listener's interest, leading him to ask a question or share some experience or thoughts of his own. When your practice (or part of it) is conceptualized around a niche, it lends itself to a more specific description, and such specific, detailed descriptions are more engaging.

Niche marketing offers you the opportunity to become – and to become known as – an expert in your field. For most of us, it feels more reasonable to promote oneself as an expert regarding a particular specialty. For example, while I would find it difficult to keep a straight face while boasting that I'm one of the best therapists in the world (I'm not!), I do feel comfortable identifying myself as one of the best cognitive-behavioral therapists in Brooklyn. Ideally, your aim is to become the “go to” person regarding your niche – perhaps the Long Island expert on bullies, or one of Westchester's leading authorities on children's adjustment to living with a mentally ill sibling.

As an expert in your niche, it's easier to attract the attention of the various media that can help you to spread the word about your practice. For example, a simple brochure website focusing on a niche is more likely to rise near the top of an internet search than a website promoting the same clinician's general practice. (Try this for yourself: pick any of the niches mentioned in this article and add the word “therapist” or “therapy” or “counseling” and see what comes up.)

Just as a niche provides an engaging focus for an elevator introduction, it can also provide a compelling topic for articles and talks. And your work is more likely to attract the attention of the press. For example, a bully expert might offer to speak to parents' association meetings, or to write an article for the parents' association bulletin. As local newspapers are focusing on “back to school” news, this clinician might send out press releases outlining some tips about how to help children deal with bullies.

The credibility derived from such exposure will often expand beyond the confines of the niche. Remember the halo effect? An audience hearing this bullying expert is likely to think of her as having expertise beyond the narrow topic of bullying, perhaps extending to more general issues of child rearing or conflict resolution in the workplace.

What's so important about credibility? We're well aware of how difficult it is for prospective clients to make that first call to us. Marketing savvy therapists look for

ways to reduce the barriers to making that first contact. Credibility helps. Whenever one is marketing a service (as distinguished from a product) the benefits are intangible, and shoppers worry about whether they will get what they want from the transaction. Credibility helps the prospective client to have more confidence in the clinician's ability to help him to achieve his goals. Some of the credibility may be borrowed from the sponsoring organization – the newspaper that cited the bullying expert, or the parents' association that sponsored the talk. Some of the credibility arises from the content of the article or the talk. Ideally, it's both.

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Selecting a niche that targets an everyday problem – a problem people don't feel stigmatized by – is another way to lower the barriers to getting started in therapy. When people attend a therapist-led workshop focused on an everyday problem, it provides them with the opportunity to “test drive” therapy in a low-risk situation. Someone attending a smoking cessation workshop or reading an article about dealing with difficult people needn't identify himself as having a serious, stigmatizing problem, as he may feel he has to do when first entering therapy. And he can get some sense of whether the therapist-author or therapist-speaker is a caring, supportive, informed and helpful clinician – someone he might want to talk to. The prospective client is in the driver's seat: he can read as much as he wants and no more, and as an audience member he can choose to ask questions or just listen. Our aim is for him to feel he has gotten some help with the issue at hand, and to conclude that “if she helped me with this, perhaps she could help me with another problem.” “If she approached this topic in a respectful, understanding and supportive manner, then perhaps I won't feel so ashamed if I talk to her about my other problems.” In these ways we can utilize the niche as an engagement tool – a way to reduce the barriers to reaching out for help.

A strategically selected niche can help to increase your private pay (i.e., non-managed care) income. Some niches are not covered by insurance (e.g., weight loss). Some niches provide an economical alternative to another costly service (e.g., divorce mediation as compared with a traditional contested divorce). Clients are willing to pay out of pocket for services when the non-financial benefit

# Niche Marketing, continued

is substantial. For example, adult “sandwich generation” children may be eager to hire a geriatric care manager to relieve them of some of the responsibilities of caring for their aging parents, or because they feel good knowing that a professional is skillfully attending to their parents’ needs. Some clients are more receptive to niches that circumvent the stigmatizing psychiatric diagnoses inherent in the medical model, gravitating towards services framed in positive terms, such as business coaching or premarital counseling.

## **Developing your Niche**

So once you’ve decided to try niche marketing, how can you proceed? Here are a few suggestions:

1. Start by identifying potential niches by reflecting on the work you feel most passionate about. Your selection of a niche shouldn’t be driven by your belief that a particular specialty will be financially viable, or because it fills a need in the community, or some other purely pragmatic reason. If your chosen niche doesn’t excite you, your lack of enthusiasm is bound to show, and the niche marketing strategy will backfire.

In his book *Breaking Free of Managed Care*, Dana Ackely proposes that reflecting on the clients you’ve most enjoyed working with can help you to identify a suitable niche. Recall how those clients spoke about their problems; this will help you to get past thinking in terms of the diagnostic labels to which we’ve become so accustomed. Most of our clients aren’t looking for help with depression or anxiety; they generally identify specific problems like “I can’t get my kids to go to bed on time” or “my partner and I argue too much.” Thinking in terms of your clients’ specific concerns and the language they use can help you to identify a niche that’s likely to resonate with the prospective clients you are aiming to engage.

Another way to brainstorm about niches is to read about the niches other clinicians have identified. In the book *Rewarding Specialties for Mental Health Clinicians* Rona LoPresti and Edward Zuckerman have considered over seventy sought-after niches in great depth. The newsletter *Psychotherapy Finances* ([www.psyfin.com](http://www.psyfin.com)) has a regular feature spotlighting a different niche market each month. You can also collaborate with colleagues to compose a list of niches: challenge each other to compile a list of as many niches as you can; read each other’s lists and do the exercise a second time. Even if none of the niches identified resonates for you, doing this exercise will help you to develop a niche mindset.

2. Once you have identified one or more potential niches, you’ll need to determine whether there are others in your geographic vicinity who are specialists in this field. If so, then try further narrowing your niche. The most common mistake is not making the niche narrow enough. While a niche in “parenting” is more narrow than one in “relationships,” even better is a niche focusing on parenting special needs children. Even better still: parenting ADD or autistic children or bullies or class clowns.

The degree to which you will need to narrow your niche will depend, to some extent, on the local market you are working in. If you’re practicing in a community with many other clinicians, it may be necessary to more precisely and narrowly define your niche. It’s helpful to do some simple market research. Ask yourself whether there is already someone in the community doing this type of work. Then ask your colleagues this same question. Use some of the online therapist directories (e.g., [PsychologyToday.com](http://PsychologyToday.com), [4Therapy.com](http://4Therapy.com), etc.) and “Google” or other search engines to determine whether there are others in your vicinity doing this kind of work. The best niche will have little competition, positioning you to become the “go to” person for this particular issue.

3. Consider whether your niche is appropriate for a private practice setting. Ask yourself: is this niche economically viable? But don’t go overboard! Some clinicians mistakenly believe that economic viability means appealing to an upper middle class or wealthy clientele. It’s been my experience that serving a predominantly middle class community generates a healthy private practice income. Middle class and economically diverse communities provide good private practice venues.

Consider whether the niche can work in a solo, outpatient model. Ask yourself whether clients will be able to get their needs met in a private practice setting, and whether you will feel sufficiently safe working with this population in a private practice setting. For example, some clinicians feel comfortable working with angry or violent clients in an agency setting but not in their home office. Some niches are best addressed with a team approach that may be better suited to an agency setting (e.g., working with persistently suicidal clients who may require frequent weekend and overnight clinician access) or may be best served in a medical facility (e.g., severely anorexic clients).

continued on page 16....

# Niche Marketing, continued from page 15

## Marketing your Niche

Once you have identified a narrowly defined niche that you feel passionate about, that is appropriate for a private practice setting, and that sets your practice apart from those of your colleagues, you can now begin to consider how to market your niche.

Start by considering who you might address your marketing efforts to. Defining a niche often makes the marketing audiences more evident. For example, a clinician working with parents of special needs children might market directly to parents by reaching out to the school parents association, as well as marketing to “gatekeepers” like pediatricians, teachers and school guidance counselors. A clinician who helps families adjust to divorce might contact divorce attorneys. Think about your marketing audience as having two parts: potential clients and prospective referral sources. Prospective referral sources include lay people and professionals; and professionals include mental health colleagues as well as professionals in other disciplines, such as law, medicine, and finance.

Once you have defined the audience that you’ll be addressing your marketing to, think about the language that you’ll be using to speak to them. With paper and pen in hand, compose (and edit) an elevator introduction of your own. Unless you’re addressing other clinicians, formulate your promotional materials (whether written or verbal) using plain language, devoid of professional jargon. If you look back at the earlier elevator introductions, you’ll see that I refer to “people” who “feel nervous” and “worry” or have a “fear of small spaces” rather than “clients” who have “anxiety” or “claustrophobia.” Avoid stigmatizing language; for example, “feeling blue” or “down” is less stigmatizing than “depression.” When composing your elevator introduction, it can be helpful to imagine addressing a particular person who represents the target audience. Emphasize the positives; focus on goals and growth and not just on the problems. For example, the clinician whose practice niche is fear of flying might talk about how gratifying it is when a successful client visits with relatives abroad or accepts a promotion that involves airplane travel. If you’ve selected a niche that you feel genuinely excited about, it should be easy to convey your passion for your work.

Some clinicians feel comfortable sharing something personal which, if kept brief and done in a professional manner, can contribute to making your elevator introduction feel more compelling and engaging. Here are a couple of mine:

Looking back, I see that my wintertime mood slumps began when I was in college, although I didn’t know it was winter blues until years later. Recognizing the pattern – that every winter my mood and energy slumped and I put on weight – was the first step. I’ve learned about the remedies for winter blues, and made some changes. Now, I’m productive and energetic all winter long. I’ve eliminated the food cravings that drove my winter weight gain, reducing my weight and my blood pressure. It’s gratifying for me to share this information with others, knowing that it can help them to feel good mentally and physically throughout the year.

Here’s another:

When I started out in private practice, I felt scared and overwhelmed at the prospect of marketing my practice. At first, I didn’t know what to do. After some time I learned some marketing principles and techniques, but I still felt awkward and uncomfortable about doing the marketing. With more information, practice and reflection, I’ve found that not only did my fears subside but that – to my surprise – I’ve come to enjoy it! I decided to become a practice building consultant because I’m excited about helping other professionals to feel at ease and even enthusiastic about marketing their practices in an ethical, authentic and comfortable way.

Some niches are ideally suited for pitching to colleagues. Think about your own practice: even if you are a generalist, it’s likely that there are situations which would lead you to consider or even feel eager to make a referral to a colleague. In other circumstances, you might welcome the opportunity to share a case with a skilled, trusted colleague, or to obtain supervision or consultation from a colleague with expertise in a particular niche.

So how can you position yourself to solicit referrals from your colleagues? One way is to develop a niche that is likely to draw referrals from colleagues who may feel ill-equipped or disinterested in working with a particular population or problem focus: niches focusing on anger management, domestic violence, addictions, sex therapy, divorce mediation, child custody evaluations, sex offenders, forensics, geriatric care management, teens, and personality disordered (e.g., borderline and narcissistic) clients all lend themselves to cultivating such collegial referrals. Another, similar approach is to aim to solicit referrals in which you and your colleague would work in tandem with the client. A therapist specializing in using a particular treatment approach for a particular problem – for example, a niche in sex therapy or using cognitive behavioral therapy for trichotillomania (compulsive hair pulling) or childhood OCD might attract the interest of colleagues who would

**continued on page 17....**

consider sharing their cases; in such situations the niche clinician might do a focused piece of work on a particular problem area (e.g., OCD or sexual dysfunction) and/or method (e.g., CBT) while the referring therapist continues working with the client around other, more general problem areas. Specializing in a treatment modality such as couples or family counseling, play therapy or group work may position you to be considered for referrals from colleagues whose patients may need such services in addition to their individual therapy. And you might consider combining a modality (e.g., family therapy or group work) with a particular niche. For example, co-parenting for divorced parents, or teen-friendly family therapy, or groups with a particular focus (e.g., smoking cessation, weight control, parenting teens, sandwich generation, etc.).

But it's not enough to offer these collegially-oriented niche services: in order to secure referrals from your colleagues, you will also need to cultivate a reputation as a capable and trusted professional. Before referring their precious clients to you, your colleagues will want to be assured of the quality of your clinical skills and your character. Are you trustworthy? Caring? Diligent? Responsible? Think about the qualities you seek out when sharing a case with a psychiatrist or other colleague; you probably value someone who promptly returns your calls, who takes the time to coordinate the case with you, and who supports

your ongoing work with your client. Some group therapists include a note in their promotional material specifying that group members are encouraged (or, sometimes, required) to continue their individual therapy while participating in the group; while not appropriate for all groups, this could be clinically appropriate for some populations as well as reassuring to the referring clinician.

Developing this kind of reputation among your peers will take more than a cursory introduction to a potential referral source. It's more likely when you've developed substantial and enduring collegial relationships. Such ongoing contact can occur in supervision or peer supervision groups, and committee, task force or board memberships which provide regular, face to face contact among groups of colleagues.

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Ask a colleague for her business card and chances are she'll ask you for yours!

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Keep in mind that one of the best ways to get referrals is to make referrals: cultivate relationships with a few trusted colleagues with whom you strive to develop a mutual referral relationship. Ask a colleague for her business card and chances are she'll ask you for yours!

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