

THE **message** **therapist's** **handbook**

A Practical Guide to the Business of Massage



Michael Alicia

The Massage Therapist's Handbook

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Illustrations by John-Michael Flate

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Introduction

When Bill Clinton was campaigning for president in 1992, he tried to stay focused on what he thought was most important to the voters in order to get elected. His now-famous sound bite, “It’s the economy, stupid,” caught my attention. At the time, I was embarking on my new massage career, and I adopted a similar phrase for myself, “It’s about the work, stupid,” to help me stay focused on what I still believe to be the most important aspect for a successful career in massage. Since then, I have hijacked another phrase and turned it into a creed: “If the work is good, they will come.” So with these two phrases, you know the basic premise of this book. I firmly believe that if our work is good and informed and focused and compassionate, supported by nothing but the best intentions, success will surely follow.

These make for terrific catchphrases, but of course there are many more practical considerations for establishing a successful practice in massage. For the beginning therapist navigating through this array of business decisions, from what to practice to where to practice, from what to charge to when to work, it can be truly daunting, if not frightening. A massage therapist is not unlike a performer leaving school for a career in music or show business. Both have been taught their crafts, but with scant attention paid to actually getting work or running a business. Developing the artist in us and working on our craft is fundamental to success, but we must also learn ways to develop and maintain our business. Some therapists do not want to spend time and energy worrying about business decisions and so choose to work for others in spas or doctor’s offices. This is a perfectly legitimate career choice and serves its purpose for the therapist and for the community. But even when working for someone else, we need to be aware of the practical aspects of a career in massage therapy.

This book aims to provide the beginning therapist with the tools to start, develop, and maintain a successful massage practice. The quotes sprinkled throughout the text are from friends and colleagues in the massage profession whom I have interviewed over the years. All of them gave generously of their time and experience to reflect on the issues that have confronted them in their own massage practices and the qualities that have contributed to their success.

I hope that *The Massage Therapist's Handbook* will help you launch a successful and rewarding practice of your own.

Acknowledgments

My initial intention for this book was to collect a series of interviews with successful massage therapists from around the country, discussing their paths to success. I developed an outline whereby we would talk about the quality of their training and then their initial foray into the business of massage. I wanted to hear how, once they left school, they established their practices and what advice they could impart to the beginning therapist to shed some light on the practical real-world way of getting started in the profession. I traveled around the country collecting interviews only to discover in the end that the material did not have a cohesive element that connected all of this valuable information. I also recognized that the interviews had a lot in common, not only with my experience and way of thinking but also with each other. Only then did I realize that I needed to write my opinions of how to start a successful practice and support my ideas with the interviews. Following is a list of contributors to the book in the form of quotations interspersed throughout the text.

Diane graduated from the Swedish Institute in New York City in 1990. She started her massage career working with professional track-and-field athletes, which eventually led to her working with the athletes at the Summer Olympics in Barcelona. She worked as a therapist at the renowned Canyon Ranch spa in Tucson, Arizona, where her background in business led to a managerial position. She parlayed her experience there into a career that focused more on spa business development and training with the intention of raising the overall standard of the massage business. Working again with Canyon Ranch, she helped develop and open spas around the country and even on the Queen Mary II, where she was responsible for training and development. She currently works for Cortiva, a company that owns several massage

schools across the country, where she works to raise the overall standard of massage education.

Peggy is a fifty-seven-year-old woman who lives and works in Melbourne, Florida. She started practicing as a massage therapist before becoming a Rolfer (structural integrationist), almost eleven years ago. She worked for a brief time as a psychotherapist before getting involved with bodywork, which helped her integrate her work into a more Eastern form of bodywork, incorporating balancing the body, the mind, and the spirit. She especially enjoys working with trauma patients.

Denise is forty-one years old and practices massage in San Francisco and Sonoma County. She has been in practice for thirteen years and opened a second office five years ago. She has what she calls a Somatic practice, which is therapeutic massage that incorporates energy and movement work in addition to body-based counseling.

Barry is a forty-eight-year-old reverend-turned-bodyworker who lives in Santa Monica, California. He has been “laying hands” on people since 1988. He started by studying Shiatsu before incorporating energy medicine, therapeutic massage, and structural integration into his practice. He has two offices, one in Santa Monica and one in Culver City, in addition to making house calls.

Robert is forty-four years old and lives in Miami Beach, Florida, and first studied massage at the University of Florida in the '70s. His professional massage career began in 1989 after graduating from Educating Hands, a well-known massage school in Miami. He practices Swedish, deep tissue, neuromuscular, Trager, and Thai massage. He worked as a therapist for the '95 Special Olympics and the '96 Olympic Games in Atlanta.

Tamara lives in Chicago and is thirty-one years old and has practiced massage for four and a half years. She graduated from the Chicago School of Massage Therapy. She first started practicing as a therapist at the Chicago Board of Trade before partnering with another therapist and opening a storefront where they employ two other therapists.

Tony is thirty-five years old and lives in Denver, Colorado. He graduated from the Massage Therapy Institute of Colorado in Denver. He started his massage career working with a hotel massage service before doing spa work and corporate chair massage. He now earns most of his massage income from private clients with the occasional hotel client. He supplements his income with a part-time job in the corporate sector where he solicits massage clients for his private practice.

Theresa graduated from the Swedish Institute in New York City in 1995 and became licensed there in '96. She started her massage career working nights, five to six shifts a week, for a company that provides massage services to gyms in New York, while also maintaining a full-time secretarial day job. After nine months she quit her day job and struck out on her own to develop a private practice while maintaining her gym job. Eventually she developed her private practice so she could leave her gym job. After the events of September 11, she relocated to Seattle, where she has carved out a niche doing house calls and opened her own private office space.

Mary is a graduate of the Swedish Institute in New York City, where she established a successful practice before moving to Amherst, a small town in Massachusetts. Establishing a successful practice in a small town was both a challenge and an adventure and ultimately proved rewarding both personally and professionally.

Alexis is fifty-five years old and graduated from the Swedish Institute in New York City in 1983. She has also been a teacher of massage at the Swedish Institute for sixteen years and at various other schools around the country. In addition to teaching, she has a full-time practice at her home on Long Island, where she works with terminally ill clients as well as the well-heeled transient summer crowd.

1. The Four-Step Guide for Success

“There are no secrets to success. It’s the result of preparation, hard work, and learning from failure.”

—Colin Powell

The Four-Step Guide for Success

Remember: It's about the work!

1. Continue your education

- Workshops
- Exchanges
- Receive massage

2. Get a job (in a spa, gym, or doctor's office)

- Practice your craft
 - Evaluation skills
 - Body mechanics
 - Build strength and stamina
 - Learn new techniques

3. Create a business plan

- Make decisions; visualize goals
- Formulate a plan
 - Short- and long-term goals
 - Outline individual steps

4. Network

- Sell yourself
- Distribute business cards
- Talk about massage
- Join professional or social organizations
- Explore related bodywork businesses in your area



Golden Rule 1

Dependability and punctuality confer credibility.

*Success, it is said, is mostly about showing up.
Show up. On time. And do what you say you will.
McDonald's is successful because people know what to expect.*

2. Qualities for Success

To determine the essential qualities and characteristics one needs to be a successful massage therapist, I conferred with my colleagues at the Swedish Institute in New York City, where I have been a teacher since 1994. We distilled the vast array of talents and characteristics down to four basic qualities:

Talent
People Skills
Business Skills
Discipline

Talent and good work are the foundations of a successful business. People skills involve good communication skills and, mostly, listening. Business skills include PR, marketing, and selling yourself. Discipline involves body maintenance, continuing education, and simple day-to-day operational skills, like returning phone calls promptly and showing up on time. These are the basic tools that are necessary to build a successful practice in massage.

Talent

Talent is subjective. What one person perceives as creative and innovative may seem ordinary and mundane to another. Talent can also be defined as instinct or even as intuition. It is one of the nebulous qualities we possess that make us unique.

Any art form requires a certain degree of talent, instinct, and intuition. Exactly how a photographer knows when to press the shutter to capture an inspiring moment or how a painter chooses the perfect color to elicit

2. *Qualities for Success*

an emotional response is inexplicable. Of course, each of these artists must also study the technical aspects of their crafts, but it is individual experience, values, and passion that make their work unique and could be defined as inspiration, the key ingredient for developing talent. We might add to that a curious mind. If the impetus for practicing massage revolves around, for example, making money, I suspect that the work will not be all that inspired or client-centered. However, if the work is client-centered, supported by a strong desire to be beneficial along with a thirst for knowledge, the quality of the work will grow, and the client's impression is sure to be affected positively. High-quality training coupled with a strong desire to be good and effective is the prerequisite for developing whatever talent we may innately possess.

Some people will like our work and some won't. No one therapist can be everybody's cup of tea. Knowing this will help our artist's ego when our work is not appreciated. I firmly believe that there is room for all of us to be successful. When it seems that our colleagues are getting more clients or our phones are not ringing, rather than begrudging others' success or belittling our own talents, we should take a deep, nurturing breath, reaffirm our commitment to the work, and acknowledge that the universe provides for us when we are ready. In the meantime, there is always room to adapt and fine-tune your work: "Work on the work." Start by evaluating your work as objectively as you can; then ask for feedback from friends and colleagues whose opinions you trust and value. Remember, it's all about the work.

I think people who succeed in this field simply *are* massage therapists, either by natural talent or through hard work and craft. Whether you succeed financially, however, depends on whether you learn to be a businessperson, your luck, and your timing; and that's a whole different kettle of fish.

Theresa, Seattle, WA

People Skills: First and Foremost, Listening

I can't overemphasize the value of listening in our profession. Listening informs our work from the first interaction through the first meeting,

the evaluation and intake, the initial touch of the session, and even in the follow-up after the session. We are listening with our whole being: our ears, our hands, and even our intuition. Remember, we are in the health-care profession. People know that we care by the way we listen. We should let our work do our speaking for us.

It comes down to the core issue of really working and knowing who you are. The people who succeed are the kind of people who can be personable and essentially let it be about the other person.

Denise, San Francisco, CA

Smiling is another very simple people skill to cultivate. This idea may seem simplistic and even silly, but it is amazing how many therapists in the day-to-day grind of work forget to be friendly. People are attracted to friendly people. Tired, worried, sad, complaining, chatty, and needy people are a turn-off. Many successful service-industry professions spend time and money helping employees develop their people skills. In the restaurant business, “the customer is always right” for a reason: the customer has the money and the option to go somewhere else. Smiling and saying, “Hello,” “How are you,” “Have a nice day,” “Thank you,” “Excuse me,” “I’m sorry,” “You’re right,” “Let me get that for you,” “How are you feeling?” “Are you comfortable?” “Can I get you anything?” “Cold water?” “Hot tea?” “Warm blanket?” “Soft pillow?” “Can I help you?” “With your coat?” “To the elevator?” “Down the stairs?” “With your packages?” “To your car?” or any of a multitude of polite gestures are the simple bedrock to developing a long-lasting relationship with our clients.

Communicating articulately, professionally, and with empathy and compassion is a vital skill to foster. Many people are completely ignorant about how their bodies work or even what they do to make their bodies hurt. The ability to explain in a simple and concise way what we believe and what our intention is for our session with them is an invaluable tool for success. Regardless of our professional assessment, we should come to it only after listening and acknowledging our client’s experience and point of view. Compassion is best exhibited through listening. Even the most out-of-touch client has the first-hand experience we need to

2. *Qualities for Success*

inform our decisions. It's important to have a point of view and a clear intention, but not as important as hearing and honoring our client's point of view. We don't have to agree with their points of view, but we have to hear them and acknowledge them before explaining our intention. Even if our clients don't want to be involved in the session, they want to be heard and acknowledged, first and foremost, and then informed. Simple is better. If they want more information, they will ask.

I think that's the key, if we'd only listen to the whispers when they come in. That's really the thing that makes the difference, all the difference in the world. My thing is to let my ego fall back out of the way to just be there for them, with them, because it has nothing to do with me, it has everything to do with them—who they are, why they're there, and how I can serve them.

Barry, Los Angeles, CA

Business Skills: Developing an Ongoing Relationship

Business is about selling. If we asked a spa owner what he was selling, he would probably say he was selling time. He has rooms with therapists, and he is selling hour-long time slots for the therapists to do massage. From the therapist's point of view, though, the product is a relationship. We are trying to develop an ongoing relationship where we provide massage. I think all business is about developing relationships: with the customer and the community, with colleagues and related businesses.

Essentially, then, we are selling ourselves. From a business point of view, our product is us. We embody our work. Our education, our talent, our personality, our physicality, our history, our ability to communicate, and our empathy all inform our clients about the work they will receive and how they will receive it. If the work is good but the package is unappealing, the relationship will end. There are good and bad ways of selling oneself. An aggressive sell is not a particularly good approach in the world of massage. Good work is our greatest selling point. If the work is good, people will tell other people and business will grow.

The Massage Therapist's Handbook

Another proactive and subtle way to sell ourselves is to practice what we preach. I constantly tell my students that if they become successful in the world of massage, their lifestyles will change. If they truly embody the new vocabulary they are learning, their lives can't help but change. If our work is congruent with our lifestyle, people will recognize that we speak from experience and will trust our opinions. Lasting and healthy relationships are built on trust.

Another aspect of our relationship with our clients is education. Remember, simple is better. Helping our clients recognize their bad habits and offering *simple* alternatives without sounding condescending or preachy helps them learn how to help themselves. (I'm speaking about suggestions that fall within our scope of practice, of course. Why their new hair color is all wrong for their eyes, we'll leave to their hairdresser.) If we educate our clients and empower them to take charge of their physical well-being, we help nurture a trusting and long-lasting relationship.

Being conversant with anatomy and physiology and even the history of the profession makes us sound professional and well educated. The ability to answer questions like "What muscle is that?" or "Does Swedish massage come from Sweden?" simply and conversationally can not only educate our clients but can impress them as well.

Starting and growing a business requires marketing and even public relations skills, which I will cover in depth in chapter 7. There are whole companies and career paths dedicated to these skills and professions, and they are important. But one of the things I love most about massage is the individual relationship I have with each of my clients. No amount of market analysis or demographic studies will provide for the success of a massage practice like simply focusing on the one-on-one relationship with the client. Once we have built a solid core of clients, they become our best PR and marketing department.

A successful business is built one client, one massage, one relationship at a time.

2. *Qualities for Success*

Discipline: A Regular Focus

The word “discipline” is both a noun and a verb and has several connotations with regard to the field of massage. The roots of massage stretch back millennia, to China over 4,500 years ago, where medicine and bodywork were inextricably tied to the martial arts. There were different schools and disciplines that practiced different physical and mental techniques to focus the energy in the body. These techniques were used to promote balance and healing as well as for self-defense, and they required the discipline, or mental and physical self-control, to perceive and cultivate *qi*, or energy. Discipline implies that energy is focused regularly toward a particular goal.

Massage, like the martial arts, is a living art and therefore requires the discipline of practice. Massage therapists, like doctors, are said to “have a practice” because our craft, like the bodies we work on, is vital, changeable, and malleable and thus requires constant attention. The demands and rigors of practicing massage are varied and extensive. Having the physical strength and sensitivity along with the emotional reserve and the mental intuition to do the work in a professional, knowledgeable, and empathetic way all require the investment of time and energy. Focusing and developing the body, the mind, and the spirit in concert is the discipline that is massage. There are no shortcuts. The successful massage therapist finds that the discipline of practicing massage often involves a lifestyle change. Using one’s body to make money requires a tremendous investment in time. Developing the mind and the spirit (small words but huge ideas) accentuates for the aspiring therapist the enormity of the discipline required to be successful and effective in the field of massage.

