

Promoting your coaching practice

Marketing your practice should be an integral part of your business plan. **Ruth Clowes** looks at the importance of promoting your work and how to go about raising your profile.

Getting started

Whether you want to attract more clients or make existing workplace customers aware of the value you add to their business, a few skills in promotion and marketing are invaluable.

Some coaches are put off the idea of promoting themselves and their work because it seems self-important, or selfish, or perhaps even a little unsavoury. You may well be uncomfortable with the idea of blowing your own trumpet – it might seem fundamentally at odds with your way of working. This mindset and guidance on how to combat it were brilliantly explored in an article by Jo Birch and Sarah Corrie in the April 2014 issue of this journal.¹

My own advice if you find yourself in this moral quandary is to concentrate your efforts on promoting the benefits of coaching generally. Consider the value of the services you provide and the ways in which they improve the lives of your clients. By actively and publicly becoming a champion of coaching you open up its benefits to a huge number of people who might benefit from it. In short – move the spotlight off yourself and onto your profession.

Finding your niche

Identifying your niche – or 'unique selling point', in marketing-speak – is an important first step in planning your promotional activities. Thankfully it's not something that you need to spend lots of money on and no special skills are needed. What is required is to spend a little time looking at your practice in as objective a way as possible in order to work out what makes your work uniquely valuable.

The steps below are best worked through in order and will take you from identifying your unique position to creating a consistent brand identity. It might seem like a bit of a nuisance, but by spending time doing this now you'll develop a clear idea of what you want to achieve and give

yourself the best possible chance of success later on.

Host a suggest-fest. Speak to family, friends, colleagues, customers, fellow practitioners and (if appropriate) former clients to find out what they think defines your practice and makes it unique. Consulting a range of people will help you identify patterns, as well as showing what qualities are important to these different audiences. Combine the ideas of others with your own and highlight those which are strongest and most important to you.

Create a brand narrative. Narrative is just a fancy name for story and your brand narrative is the story of who you are, what you do and why you do it. Your story is unique and your personal journey and experiences as a practitioner are what have shaped you as a coach. A coherent narrative is the foundation of your brand identity and something you'll return to again and again to keep your promotional efforts on track.

Identify your audience. When it comes to communication, the audience is everything. You will already have noticed from carrying out the first point on this plan that different groups of people have different priorities and attach importance to different elements of your work. Bear these differences in mind when you're promoting what you do. For example, a workplace customer might attach great importance to your qualifications and insurance, whereas a private client might appreciate a jargon-free approach and a focus on confidentiality and empathy.

Prepare some marketing collateral. Now that you've done the preparation work it's time to set the stage for your marketing campaign. Professional-looking flyers and business cards are a wise investment and offer a great opportunity to spread the word about what you do. There are many online tools to help you design your own documents,² and a little

research and negotiation should get you a good price with a local printer. Keep in mind what you've already learned, communicate your brand identity and tailor your marketing materials to your audience.

Build your online reputation. As with physical marketing collateral, your website and any social media channels should create a consistent and cohesive impression of your work. Make sure that you advertise the full range of services you are able to provide and present them in a clear, accessible way. If you lack technical skills, BACP's IT team can set up and maintain your website for you.³

Raising your profile from within

If you're already working with a business to provide coaching for their workforce, your biggest challenge may be demonstrating your value to senior members of staff. It is vital that senior staff members are aware of the many benefits that your work brings to the company, and the full breadth of the services you provide. If they're not, your work will be undervalued, which can lead to your contribution being overlooked, unappreciated and judged as an indulgent 'nice to have' add-on at best, and at worst a waste of money. The consequences of this kind of attitude among decision makers during times of restructuring or financial pressure are obvious.

I've put together the following pieces of advice with the help of Rick Hughes, BACP's Lead Advisor for Workplace. Don't feel that you need to implement all these tips at once – dip in and start with whatever is most comfortable for you and find a marketing strategy compatible with how you work.

Highlight the range of services you provide. This is where 'finding your niche' will be useful! Making sure that your customers know exactly how much extra value you're able to provide to their business will make you seem like a cost-effective, efficient provider. Do you have skills in counselling, stress management, mediation or critical incident management? Make your customer aware of these services and the additional value they could bring to the business.

Recruit ambassadors. Meet with senior staff members to explain what you do and the

difference you make, and use this opportunity to identify ambassadors who can act as 'champions' for your service. Put effort into maintaining good relationships with those staff members who value your work, provide them with a 'cheat sheet' of key statistics and make sure they know that their time and effort are valued.

Provide an accessible face for your service. Organise some free lunchtime seminars about the service you offer, get involved with wellbeing awareness days or collaborate with the company's occupational health staff to champion mental health policies. By embedding yourself in the fabric of the business in this way you are more likely to be seen as an indispensable part of it, rather than an add-on.

Get on the company website. Try to secure an online presence on your customer's intranet site and update this regularly with tips and advice on how to handle common problems. You could take some ideas from BACP's press releases aimed at lifestyle and workplace publications. Back this guidance up with further information about your coaching service and how it can help.

Keep it fresh. It is important to keep up the momentum and to continually refresh and review your approach to marketing. Things can change quickly; a restructure for example could lead to an entirely different dynamic within the senior management team. If you keep up-to-date with what's happening in the broader company landscape, you're in a good position to respond quickly and effectively to developments.

Promoting your private practice

Marketing your private practice might seem like a daunting task at first but by planning ahead, starting small and taking advantage of the help and support available to you it will become far less intimidating.

It is important to decide a clear objective before you start. This will help you identify your key audience, which in turn will help you identify where you are best to focus your promotion efforts.

Put some of the following advice into practice to kick-start your own marketing campaign.

Capitalise on existing contacts. Word of mouth is the most powerful marketing tool there

is. Think of the friends and family you have locally and work out how they can spread the word about your work to a wider audience. If a dozen people put one of your flyers on a work noticeboard how many potential clients might you reach? Recruit mini-ambassadors from among your contacts to champion your work within their own personal and professional networks.

Keep it local. To keep things manageable, set a radius around the location of your practice and focus your promotion efforts within this area. Get in touch with business groups, networking event organisers and social clubs in your chosen area and offer to visit or give a talk about what you do. Avoid spreading yourself too thinly by assessing opportunities as you identify them and concentrating on those that are most likely to help you achieve your aims.

Safety in numbers. Get together with a handful of local counsellors and coaches and organise a charity event or open day, perhaps to coincide with an awareness day like National Coaching Day. You'll benefit from the synergy of a group of like-minded professionals by drawing a bigger crowd, cross-promoting and perhaps getting local media coverage. Operating as a team will also make the event easier to organise by spreading the workload.

Be social. Get in touch with local bloggers and those who run websites and media pages with an audience that matches your client base. For example, if you specialise in executive coaching a blog about management would be a good bet. Offer to write a short article relevant to the audience, in this case maintaining a healthy work/life balance might be a good example. This is a great way to both offer useful advice and promote your services at the same time.

Become a spokesperson. One step up from this is to contact local newspapers and radio programmes offering your services as an expert coach. Media outlets generally have a network of spokespeople with different areas of expertise who they contact on an ad-hoc basis to offer advice or comment on breaking news. BACP's Media team can support you in this type of work.⁴

Seize the moment

If the idea of promoting your service still feels daunting, you'll be glad to know that you don't

have to go it alone. BACP's CPD courses⁵ and professional development days offer frequent opportunities to learn new marketing skills. There are lots of reputable online resources available too, many of which offer free guides and advice. Two of my favourites are Smarta and sb.⁶

There has never been a better time to begin your own marketing campaign to promote the value of the work you do. Start small, think local and be patient, and you'll soon start seeing the benefits of effective promotion.

References

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