

Seven Ways to Market Your Philosophical Counselling Services

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'How do I market my philosophical counselling services?' a philosophical counsellor asked me the other day. Indeed, the topic of marketing one's services comes up quite frequently, but a simple answer to this question seems as difficult to obtain as an answer to the greatest philosophical problems. Yet this question has been the inspiration for writing this article, one that I hope will shed some light on this issue and will help practitioners establish a favourable public image and gain more business.

The truth is that marketing one's PC services is not much different from marketing any other service, but because the field of PC is not well-established in modern society, practitioners often find it difficult to market their services and don't know where to start. What I shall do in this brief article is explain the need to create a favourable public image, discuss the state of the PC industry as it relates to marketing, and list seven ways you can market your services and gain more clients.

But before we talk about how to market your services, I'd like to explain why it is crucial to develop a favourable public image. A client once told me, 'what's most important is the client's perception of you, not your perception of yourself.' This rather profound statement changed the way I did business, and changed the way I looked at my business. But how does this relate to a public image, and more importantly, how does this relate to the field of PC?

Since PC is client-centred, a practitioner's focus is entirely on the client and the client's worldview. You may view yourself as an excellent philosophical counsellor, and you may believe that PC offers a superior service to other forms of counselling. But if your client and/or potential clients don't believe this, then your chances of gaining new business and the chances of PC developing as an industry are slim. Simply put, if your clients and target market don't believe that PC is at least as useful as other forms of counselling (i.e. psychotherapy, psychoanalysis), then they won't be interested in your services.

Therefore, the next time you are speaking with a client or trying to gain new clients, think about their perception of you and your business, and make sure that they understand and believe the benefits of PC over other forms of counselling. Which is not to say that other forms of counselling are useless, but rather, that PC is the best solution when one's life problems are philosophical in nature. We all know this, but do your clients know this? This is a crucial point to consider, because if the client doesn't understand this, why would he/she pay money for your services?

Now, before we move on to the second point, I'd like to clarify some things. There have been arguments about whether PC is in fact, therapy, and whether PC should in fact, solve problems. I won't go into detail about any of

these points, because the aim of this article is to help you market your services and not to talk about what PC is and is not.

But a simple fact of business is this: if you are offering any sort of service, be it philosophical counselling or psychotherapy, the client wants to know that they are paying for, and what they are getting. There is an exchange between you (the practitioner) and the client. The client pays an hourly or per session fee, and in exchange for that money, the client gets philosophical counselling. Therefore, the client has a problem, for which they are seeking a solution, and they are paying you, the philosophical counsellor, to help them.

Now, whether PC is supposed to solve problems is not the issue here, but rather, that clients come to the counsellor because they are seeking answers to their problems. This is the bottom line. And you, as the practitioner, should think of your business in these terms, and not the theoretical terms. You are offering a service, and if the client doesn't believe that it is a valuable service, then there is no reason for him or her to remain a client.

Whilst PC has some similarities with other forms of counselling, one way in which it is different is that it is not firmly entrenched into our society. Meaning that when the average person has a problem, they think about going to a psychologist or psychiatrist, and not a philosophical counsellor. This is an unfortunate result of the near monopoly that the psychologists and psychiatrists have in mental health services. And this, believe it or not, has to be changed if PC is going to be a successful form of counselling. I won't discuss how this is to be changed, because there would not be enough space in this article, but I will say that this is an opportunity for philosophical counsellors to differentiate themselves from the psychologists and psychiatrists, and prove that PC is also a viable form of counselling. The way to make philosophical counselling a household name begins with each counsellor, and how effectively they market their services. This leads us to the seven ways to market your philosophical counselling services.

Referrals from family and friends

This might seem obvious, but most people fail to look at their single greatest source of new business: referrals. As I'm sure you've heard before, word of mouth is the most effective and least expensive way of generating new business. But how does one approach family members and friends without seeming too intrusive? It's very easy, because family and friends will usually be the most interested in hearing about your work and will be more likely to want to help you than anyone else.

What I've found works best is a simple approach, explaining to them exactly what you do (stressing of course, the benefits

of your service) and then telling them that you are always looking to expand your business and gain new clients.

Something that works in the insurance business (which I'm sure could also work in PC) is to have the people you speak with write down the names and contact details of three people they feel might be interested in hearing more about your services. If you do this with each person you speak with, you'll build many referrals, or at least, you'll be contacting many people, which will increase your chances of gaining new business.

But whatever your approach is, always remember that the people close to you will often be the most helpful, and you would do well to ask for their help. And always make sure to thank those who give you referrals. If you do gain a new client thanks to their help, a thank-you card is always appropriate.

Develop an Internet Presence

This is another point that at first seems rather obvious, yet surprisingly few practitioners have established themselves on the Internet. Other than being the "trendy" thing to do, how would a counsellor benefit from doing this?

Firstly, having a web site that contains details of your services, your qualifications, and your contact information is very valuable to potential clients who want to 'check you out' before doing business with you. This enables your target market to find out more about you, your qualifications, and how they can contact you if they have a need for your services. If they have questions, they can simply browse your web site for the answers or can even send you an email.

Secondly, you can even use your web site to provide counselling services. How, you might ask? I've seen at least one practitioner who provides services online, thus making it easier and more convenient for clients who can't visit his office. People can receive philosophical counselling from the comfort of their own home, and at the time of their choosing. This is a brilliant way to use the Internet to expand your business. As to how this can be set up, any decent Webmaster and/or hosting company can set up a web site from which you can do business with your clients.

I urge all of you to use this new technology to your benefit, it is indeed a new way to market your services and set yourselves apart from the typical counsellors.

Join Professional Organisations

A good way to network amongst other professionals is to join a professional organisation, and it does not specifically have to be one that deals only with PC. For example, in addition to the many PC organisations, one might try joining other organisations dealing with counselling, or even psychotherapy.

Although some practitioners might not fancy the idea of joining an organisation created to promote the interests of psychotherapy, it can be a good way to gain new clients. How, you ask? It's because psychotherapy cannot, and

should not, try to address all problems. There are many (most, in my opinion) problems with which PC can deal much better. The sooner that counsellors realise that psychotherapy is not the enemy, and can in fact, work together with philosophical counselling, the sooner they can go about gaining new clients and filling the need that psychotherapy and other forms of counselling cannot.

Whatever organisation you decide to join, they are beneficial because they offer you ample opportunities to speak with other professionals and to build contacts. Who knows, you might meet a counsellor who is unable to help one of his/her potential clients, and you might gain some business this way.

Working together, rather than bringing others down, is a way to help spread the word about PC and your services, and professional organisations offer the practitioner a way to immediately gain the insights and knowledge of other professionals in the counselling business.

Post adverts in colleges/universities

Colleges and universities are another good place to market your services, mainly because there are always many people drifting in and out of the campuses. Business is indeed a numbers game, because if 1,000 rather than 100 people see your advert or hear about your services, you're more likely to gain more clients.

A few good places to put up adverts are the bulletin boards or other high-traffic areas in universities, such as the library, eating areas, and student stores. You can even arrange to hand out brochures or simple cards explaining your services to students in the university. This would require, however, permission from the professor or even the university. But this is a very valuable way to create interest in your services.

Creating a partnership with professors at a nearby university will give you the opportunity to reach out directly to students and other people who might have a need for your services. And students who receive brochures directly from their professors will be more likely to read them and be receptive towards your services.

Something else related to this topic is perhaps making a presentation in philosophy or psychology classes in the university, explaining your services and giving an introduction on how philosophy can be used to counsel people. This is a perfect way to use the angle of education and philosophy to market your services, and at the very least might make some people consider becoming practitioners themselves!

Advertise in trade magazines

Although advertising can be expensive and not a very cost-effective way of promoting your business sometimes, advertising in a trade magazine is a useful way to gain more clients.

Firstly, it doesn't cost nearly as much to advertise in a trade magazine, as they usually only have a readership of several thousand people, and sometimes more than that.

These magazines offer very reasonable rates and even if you don't have a big advertising budget, it is a reasonable way to advertise your services.

Furthermore, you are guaranteed to reach a highly specific market (i.e. counsellors in Western Europe). Targeting a niche market such as this can often times be more successful than placing an advert in the Guardian newspaper or in Time magazine, mainly because you will reach a concentrated group of people who are at least somewhat interested in what you have to offer.

Public Speaking

Some people are terrified of public speaking, but if they knew just how much business they could gain by doing this, they might change their minds. Public speaking is not only a great way to build up your confidence, but it is also a great way to reach out to the community and gain more clients.

The best way to approach this is to have a free seminar or workshop on topics such as 'How to handle stress' or 'How to improve your marriage,' rather than speaking only about your services or only about philosophical counselling. In this way, you will be contributing something useful to your community, and gain the trust of the people who attend your seminars. And it won't seem like you are just trying to promote yourself.

At least several philosophical counsellors focus on issues such as marriage counselling and handling stress in their practices. A great way to market your services is to offer these types of seminars, where your target market can interact with you and learn something that they can apply to their everyday lives.

You are then, much more likely to gain clients from these seminars, as the people will already trust you, and will have learnt something useful from you. At the end of the seminar, you can hand out evaluation cards and explain that you offer such services. These people are much more likely to be interested in your services and are much more likely to trust you than people who don't know you or your services.

A few places where you could hold such seminars are libraries, community centres, parks and universities.

Hire a public relations specialist

Even if you've mastered the previous six points and are good at sales or marketing, there is still one distinction: you are specialised in philosophical counselling, and are an expert in your own field, but you are probably not an expert in sales or marketing. Even if you were, just as you would not seek a plumber for complicated legal advice, or an estate agent for advice on how to save your marriage, a philosophical counsellor needs to consider the benefits of seeking a public relations or marketing specialist.

Why, you might ask? Because surely, a practitioner could launch their own PR campaign and do everything by themselves. But the question is not whether this can be done, the question is whether this is a good use of time and resources for a philosophical counsellor, one who is an expert in philosophy and philosophical counselling,

and dedicates their time to helping their counselees. The answer is, probably not.

There are many reasons why it is extremely beneficial to hire a public relations specialist. Mainly, such a professional understands how to present your business and your services in such a way as to create a favourable public image and generate interest in your services. A PR professional is an expert at helping change attitudes and opinions about products and services, and can help market your service and give it the right 'angle' that it needs.

Indeed, there are examples in the PC field, of practitioners hiring PR specialists and reaping huge benefits as a result of doing so. I won't mention these specific examples now, but will say that a true PR professional will help you establish or build upon a favourable public image, generate more interest in your services and in PC as a practice, and help you get more clients.

Many practitioners hesitate to seek the services of a PR professional, mainly because they are afraid they cannot afford such services, or feel that they already have enough clients. But, as I tell my clients, the best time to market your services is when you are most busy. Why? Because clients come and go, and it sometimes takes weeks or months to gain new clients. In order to have a successful practice, every philosophical counsellor needs constant business. A good way to accomplish this is with a strong PR or marketing push, and such professionals can help you accomplish just that, at rates which might be surprisingly affordable. There is an old saying, 'Ask, and ye shall receive.' This of course, applies in seeking the services of a PR professional.

Conclusion

These are only a few ways to market your services, and I am sure that there are many other ways. What I've hoped to do with this article is to inspire philosophical counsellors to take a more active approach in promoting their services, and thus, in promoting the field of philosophical counselling.

What I've also hoped to do is open the door to public relations professionals such as myself, and I hope that there can be a continuous cooperation between philosophical counsellors and public relations and marketing professionals. This is a partnership that will surely advance the interests of both parties involved.

I look forward to a day when PC shares the spotlight with other forms of counselling, and to a day when PC becomes not an alternative to counselling, but the preferred method of counselling.

Biographical Note

Arin Vahanian is a communications consultant and copywriter with years of experience in implementing PR and Marketing programmes for a variety of companies, ranging from multinationals such as American Express to smaller businesses such as LASplash.com. Arin is available to work with individual clients who wish to increase public awareness of their product or service, or even increase sales and establish a customer base.

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