





Getting Him Through the Door: How to market massage therapy to males

By Amanda Nevels

According to Jean Bailey, marketing to men is sort of drawn from one of the cardinal rules of writing children's books. "Girls will read books with a boy as the main character, but boys will not read books with a girl as the main character."

An interesting concept and definite conversation starter, but what relevance do gender roles have when it comes to massage therapy?

Bailey would know. She has 27 years of corporate marketing and advertising experience, nine of which focused on working for men's fashion and five on men's hair care. She is also certified in reflexology, teaches marketing and sales for a Chicago-based massage therapy school, lectures on communications for other health-related businesses and maintains a small private practice in Evanston, Illinois. Bailey theorizes that the answer to that question is rooted in the perception that men are highly sensitive about entering an environment that does not recognize their masculine needs. "It simply does not feel comfortable for them," she says.

Customer retention is the key in running any business. Yet, getting clients through the door initially takes careful consideration and planning.

All clients want the same experience—they want to find a massage therapist who has empathy and with whom they feel comfortable. Yet men tend to look more at the functionality of the product or service being offered (e.g., increased circulation, physiological-based effects) and women are more focused on the sensory experience (e.g., the fragrance of massage oils and creams and luxuriousness of the linens).

In an attempt to simplify a complex topic, the following seven points are some that all massage therapists seeking to boost their male client base should consider when running a practice.

1. Societal Acceptance

Historically, massage may be one of the oldest and simplest forms of health care, dating back to Egyptian tomb paintings and ancient Chinese healing practices, yet Western culture has been slow to embrace it.

"We are starved for touch in our society, and it's a rewarding thing," says Bailey. "There are so many indirect things accomplished through touch, which may justify why more and more men are choosing to get massages."

America has always had an odd relationship with

Features v. Benefits

Features are a factual statement about the service being promoted. For example, features of massage therapy practice might be:

- Therapists who are AMTA members;
- Membership program;
- Referral program;
- Customized therapy sessions;
- Extended hours of operation.

However, features don't sell. It's the benefits—or the “What's in it for me?” factor—that you can offer potential clients that will ultimately get them on your table. Some examples of benefits, or results, are:

- Massage therapy designed for a client's particular needs to target specific pain;
- The convenience of being able to get a massage whenever best fits a client's schedule;
- Ease of payment and scheduling options through a membership program;
- The potential to earn money-back or discounted services through a referral program.

As with any business owner and operator, it's in your best interest to help clients draw the connection to *why* they want and need your services. It may be helpful to come up with prepared sales pitches to describe the benefits that you're offering.

Hard v. Soft Sell

In marketing, there are hard and soft tactics that can be utilized to sell just about everything. The soft sell—or using more subtle marketing tactics—is more of an education process. Hard marketing tactics are more revenue-driven and aimed at making the on-the-spot sale.

When making a purchasing decision, says Bailey, men look at four main elements: logical, cognitive, significant and research-based. “However, our emotions control us a lot more than we realize,” she adds. “This results in us buying things emotionally and justifying them logically.” An example would be a person buying a Jaguar and justifying the purchase because the car had a high resale value, when the truth is that it makes him feel good.

With men, says Bailey, it's important to promote the “harder” aspects, the science behind the purchase. Knowing your customer and being able to think in terms of results will go a long way. You also need to approach potential clients with the assumption that they know little about what you do and can offer them, answering such questions as: “What results will massage therapy bring me?” and “Why would I consider massage therapy as an option?”

One of the first things Nordstrom asks his male clients is how often they get the oil changed in their cars. “Men suddenly become a lot more understanding and open to the concept of massage therapy as body maintenance so that they do not end up having to go to the doctor ... or, in comparison terms, as an oil change every few months so that they don't have to take the car into the shop,” Nordstrom explains.

For women, more focus can be geared toward the “softer” side of massage therapy. “There is a difference between offering someone

a really luxurious chic towel or a towel that is comfortable,” says Nordstrom. “Men just want something that is comfortable.”

Yet, Dolce Barber & Spa in Arizona is trying to create the perception that the spa concept may be applicable to a male audience. When you think barbershop perhaps some things come to mind—the bright red spiral ribbons of the classic barber's pole, plastic combs floating in a sea of antiseptic or an abundance of straight razors. While Dolce Barber & Spa does specialize in an old-fashioned straight razor shave (in fact, it's their most popular service) there is nothing traditional about its look and feel. When they opened the doors in December 2005, the aim was to take the barbershop concept into the 21st century.

The founding Dolce Spa, a more traditional spa atmosphere with mainly female clientele, already had a high number of repeat male customers (around 18 percent), who ranged in age from 25 to 55 years and generally had a higher level of income. Given that demographic, Dolce knew that it could sell on the quality of the service and not on the price, since it tends to be on the higher end.

Massage has been booked solid since the opening of the Barber & Spa and there are a variety of different specialty options, ranging from the stronger pressure massages to a “flight of ale” and “heated golf ball,” says Theresa Sarna, Dolce's public relations director.

touch, says Mark W. Dixon, NCTMB, HHP. “Each individual’s personal relationship with and acceptance of touch is different.” There is still a lot of mystery shrouding it, maintains Bailey. “If not properly informed, men [especially] may never enter what may be perceived as ‘another world’ for them.”

However, statistics show that there appears to be a growing societal acceptance of professional massage. In the past decade, the number of both men *and* women who received a massage in the last year has doubled. And while more women (43 percent) have had a massage in the last five years compared to 25 percent of men, the number of men getting massage is on the rise. According to AMTA’s 2007 consumer survey, use of massage among men increased 5 percent from 2006 to 2007—17 percent of men had a massage in the last 12 months compared to only 12 percent last year.

While the physical act of massage therapy may know no gender, some massage therapists do admit to approaching male and female clients differently.

Dixon, who has worked for many private practices specializing in sports massage and the management of stress and pain, says he tends to be a little more nurturing and gentle with females. “I find that they are more willing to allow themselves to be vulnerable enough to receive it,” he says. Dixon is quick to add, however, that he is not into “gender-izing” a community and service. “I’m interested in providing valuable care to all who can benefit.”

2. Education

“Relaxation to men might be having

a couple beers on the beach,” says Pete Whitridge, a licensed massage therapist and former assistant director of the Florida School of Massage in Gainesville. “Once you can educate a potential male client by having them experience and feel the difference a massage can make in his ability to relax, it’s a whole different ballgame.”

Whitridge, who also teaches “Myofascial Components of Pain” workshops throughout the Southeast, as well as Florida law, ethics and business building classes, strongly urges that massage therapists go out to corporate offices during the day and offer chair massages. “For many men this will be their first experience with massage, plus there is the added ‘safety’ of being fully clothed,” he says. The real benefit is that they will be able to grasp how good they feel afterward—that’s the genuine selling point.

In his practice, Whitridge always offers a chair massage as an available option, which he says a male might find more comfortable at first, but this can easily transition into a table massage as therapy progresses.

In addition to showing men that massage therapy is beneficial, Whitridge says, the process really needs to be spelled out in a way that is safe, nonsexual and not feminine. “Men don’t want to be pampered, they want to be maintained,” says Nathan Nordstrom, a licensed massage therapist in Oregon.

Make the procedures and the process crystal clear in your literature and website, beginning with exactly how the appointment will go and what will be expected of both the client and the therapist. Especially the disrobing process, says Bailey. “Men are not big on looking silly.”

3. Specialization

AMTA’s latest consumer survey also revealed something else: men have massages for medical reasons more often than women. It’s something Whitridge agrees with.

Men would get massage more often if they were approached in a manner that message it is a part of a treatment for specific conditions, such as stress reduction or diabetes, and not as an indulgence, says Whitridge.

“You need to find your niche in working with pain, whether through injury evaluations, orthopedic assessments or sports injuries,” says Whitridge, who specializes in pain management, stress management and injury recovery and works with patients who have a lot of pathological problems or who are undergoing treatment for

cancer.

You can increase your client base by acquiring pain reduction and pain management skills for specific illnesses, such as back pain, chronic pain and headaches, says Whitridge. The best way to acquire these skills is to take continuing education courses and keep current on massage therapy developments.

“Once a patient is in the room and on the table there is not a lot of [gender] difference,” says Whitridge, adding that as a male massage therapist, getting another man on the table is really the hardest challenge.

4. Environment

As noted earlier, men have a tough time entering into a world that is foreign to them. And there’s nothing more foreign to some men than a massage therapy clinic. This is why it’s so vital to work with what’s biggest in your community, says Nordstrom. “If you live in a rural area where the major business is a lumberyard, offer an environment that works with your clients—meaning, plaid fabrics in reds and blues, brown bear statues, framed fly fishing art on the wall and basically anything that helps your practice to have that ‘at home’ feel.”

Dolce Barber & Spa specifically created an environment where men would feel at ease and where all the added amenities would take the experience to the next level. The spa mirrors that of a “high-tech” pub. Each barber station has individual controls—shampoo basin, plasma TV and complementary nonalcoholic (the liquor license is pending) beer on tap.

“When I worked in hair care for men, hair salons that were too feminine did not seem comfortable for them,” says Bailey. There also needs to be a professional focus that has a little bit of a clinical feel to avoid the prostitution assumption (common with males), says Nordstrom, but not so much of a clinical feel so that it feels like a doctor’s office. There needs to be a balance.

The environment at Massage Envy is not anything like a salon, spa or clinic. The décor is simple and professional and the message is clear that clients are in a place of relaxation and physical wellness.

Katie Cass, co-owner of Massage Envy in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, keeps issues of *GQ* alongside a host of female-orientated publications in the waiting area and VIP lounge at Massage Envy to show clients that males are certainly welcomed and encouraged. “You can also toss a few *Sports Illustrated* magazines or *Wall Street Jour-*

nals around for good measure,” urges Bailey. Men might be a little afraid to cross the threshold at first, but one thing that definitely will bring men in, says Bailey, is simply seeing other men in the place of business.

This makes gyms a natural venue to market massage to men because they already have an established comfort level, and “men need to have a certain level of control to feel comfortable,” says Bailey.

5. Cross-marketing

“Usually one service gets them through the door,” says Sarna. “That ultimately leads to crossing over to other services.”

But what initially draws in that client? Nordstrom, who lives in a town situated next to a major chiropractic college, flipped through the phonebook for chiropractors and found page after page of practitioners. “I called up a few and asked if they worked with massage therapists,” he says. Of the five Nordstrom had phoned, two worked with massage therapists in the office and the other three had massage therapists they worked with on a semi-regular basis. “This trend has become more popular in the last three to five years. Doctors prescribe massage therapy and then the massage therapist refers the client back to the doctor for a follow-up.”

Nordstrom, who considers himself more of a cross-consultant when it comes to marketing, has a client base that is 50 percent male and 50 percent female. Most of his male clients, he says, he has gotten through the spouse.

Generally, you talk with the wife or significant other because women are usually more in tune with their

Sidebar 2

Hitting the Gym

The primary reason for seeking out massage therapy for Ralph [see if we can get last name], a 48-year old stock broker from Libertyville, Illinois, was to help with muscle recovery, pain and stiffness when he started working out again with a trainer.

It had been more than five years since Ralph had worked out regularly, so he was extremely sore and stiff when he started getting back into a regular routine. “My body wasn’t as quick to recover as it used to be,” he says, which is why he went once, sometimes twice, a week for massage. “It made a noticeable difference on how I felt,” he says, as well as making it easier to drag himself to the gym to work out three times a week.

Ralph looks for massage therapists who know and understand their clients’ needs and who can communicate clearly without being “chatty.” “Personally, I am not interested in discussing anything else when I’m there to relax,” he says.

While Ralph finds any location that isn’t dirty, noisy or overly clinical an ideal location for receiving a massage, he favors the gym where he can easily shower after a workout, go for a massage and then hit the steam room.

Price isn’t that much of a factor for Ralph, but time and convenience, on the other hand, are. “It’s difficult to spend more than a half hour to 45 minutes to get a massage.” The gym where he goes is five minutes from his house, open 24 hours and massage therapists are available during most of the day from early morning until 8 or 8:30 pm.

“I try to get the same therapist every time, but I’ll use the two others that are there.”

bodies and when they are in need of treatment, says Nordstrom. Men are less open about this, and it’s usually through telling their spouse that something is bothering them that it comes up in conversation.

Nordstrom’s female clients help him with his marketing. In the past few months he has had 18 skeptical males enter his practice through recommendation of their spouses to have Nordstrom find the source of inflammation or pain. Whitridge has also had success encouraging wives or significant others to give out gift certificates, and he always follows up each treatment session with a phone call.

In addition, Dolce Barber & Spa has gone one step further and instituted a client referral program, where for every five people that a client refers, that client earns a \$50 gift card.

6. Branding/Advertising

Nordstrom was once asked by an employer to wear a sandwich board and walk up and down the street to advertise his services. Of course, he declined. However, signage can go a long way when utilized properly.

In fact, according to Cass, a lot of first timers are attracted by the large signage she has planted on their busy street.

But signage is not the only tactic you can use. Massage Envy also sends out weekly money mailers. In addition to mailing out a newsletter to their client database, Dolce Barber & Spa sends “where are you” letters every six months to clients who have not come back. The spa’s call center also recommends the Barber to potential clients, says Theresa Sarna, Dolce’s public relations di-

rector. “We also do a lot of correspondence with local areas, sending out a welcome in the neighborhood mailers, direct mail pieces and four-week appointment reminders.”

Advertising is what most people think of first when they think of marketing their business. However, advertising isn't worth its big price tag unless it is targeted and sends the right message.

“I once saw an advertisement that had a naked woman draped with a sheet with a tagline that read: ‘Come in for a couples massage!’” says Nordstrom. “They were advertising what they didn't want to advertise. What woman is going to see that and think, ‘yes, we should get a couples massage!?’”

Instead, to increase your male client base, include images of a man on a massage table as opposed to using all women in your marketing materials, says Bailey.

Targeting holidays and special occasions can also have mixed results. While Dixon has never had any success with a Father's Day promotion, Dolce Barber & Spa has seen results from marketing gift certificates and wedding packages for grooms to its female clientele in the Spa. Massage Envy has found a return on investment after running Father's Day promotional specials along with “game day” sports massage that are targeted specifically toward men.

Whitridge has seen some success in placing his logo and contact information on ice packs that are used in treating injuries and inflamed muscles, which clients can take with them and reuse. However, “the best marketing you can do is word of mouth,” says Nordstrom. In fact, it's the primary advertising that he currently does in addition to working with doctors in getting referrals and treatment prescriptions.

7. Confidence

A therapist's confidence and experience speak volumes.

As a massage therapist, you really need to relate to your clients, spend time talking to them and establish a level of comfort and therapeutic value, says Nordstrom. “You need to be affirming without ever having to say “I told you so.””

A good massage therapist will educate clients. “If your clients don't believe in you, they will not come back,” says Nordstrom. “It's as simple as that.” Men, Nordstrom finds, are more skeptical than women so that initial bar is set higher.

“Men very clearly like to know that you [the massage therapist] know what you are doing,” says Whitridge. “I often educate clients during the session and name the muscles I'm working on and tell them what I'm doing and why.” This tends to go a long way in establishing trust and a professional relationship.

However, he adds that every massage is brand new and he communicates the same way with every client—lots of eye contact, active listening, empathy and never interrupting or assuming. “You need to be friendly and engage responses,” says Dixon, but at the same time be careful never to initiate a full conversation or ask “social” questions once a session has begun.

There is also the obstacle in establishing credibility with clients when many massage therapists are new to the field and the turnover is incredibly high, says Whitridge. “Less than 20 percent of the massage therapists licensed in Florida have been licensed more than 12 years ... there's not a lot of longevity in the industry.” The result is a lot of young people new to the field trying to succeed in a hard market.

The more comfortable you are as a massage therapist, the more confidence you will have, and the more your clients will have in you—whether they are male or female.

