

Using Strategic Networking To Build Your Private Practice



By Lynne Spevack, LCSW

There are many marketing approaches, but networking should, arguably, be one method in every private practitioner's repertoire. Most of us are already doing some networking, with varying degrees of purpose, strategy and skill. What follows are some principles and strategies aimed at boosting the effectiveness of your networking endeavors.

Networking Fundamentals

Networking should aim to build ongoing, substantial relationships with people who are likely to refer clients to your practice. One-shots will generally bear meager results, if any, leading you to feel unnecessarily discouraged. The best networking opportunities will allow others to get to know you well enough to recognize some of the qualities that make you a good therapist, whether that's your compassion, your intelligence, your skill, your thoughtfulness, or your diligence.

Although it's fine to use mail, email and telephone contact to "break the ice" initially and later to maintain contact, don't stop there! Most effective networking involves periodic face to face meetings.

Generally, networking is a local endeavor. It's best to select a practice location you stay with over the long haul.

Expect networking to be an ongoing process, and that the results will develop gradually. Keep on networking! If you need or want to build your practice more quickly, consider supplementing networking with other marketing activities.

The "Whos" of Networking:

In contemplating possible networking opportunities, it can be helpful to distinguish between potential clients and gatekeepers – those whose position makes it likely they will have the opportunity to refer others to you. Don't overlook the fact that other therapists are gatekeepers, just as you are to them! Clients often rely on their therapists as a resource when seeking referrals for their friends, family members and colleagues.

In terms of broadening your contacts with potential clients, consider that some of your social and leisure activities, volunteer work and hobbies – a book club, political organization or sports team – might also provide networking opportunities, if you're comfortable with this arrangement and diligent about maintaining a professional demeanor.

Professional networking can occur individually, of course,

but also in groups. Some of the best opportunities for professional networking include supervision groups, courses and committees, all of which provide others with the time and opportunity to get to know you and your work.

Consider some of these networking possibilities:

- People who've already made referrals to you – whether or not those referrals materialized. Maintaining a referral log can help to remind you of who these people are.
- People who've expressed an interest in making referrals to you.
- Healthcare professionals who participate in the same insurance panels. Don't limit yourself to doctors; consider reaching out to other healthcare professionals such as chiropractors. When networking with physicians offices, don't overlook the support staff: physician's assistants and office managers, among others, are often in a position to make referrals.
- Geographically focused networking. Aim to get to know everyone in your office building, block or neighborhood. Ask them about their businesses, and let them know that you work nearby.
- Niche-based networking. Your practice niche can be an important organizing force when strategizing your networking efforts. For example, a therapist with a specialty in treating ADD could join and attend the meetings of her local chapter of CHADD. Consider getting involved with professional organizations or committees that interest you, or spearheading a new committee based on your interests. Some of the best networking opportunities can be in organizations in which you are the only clinician, making you the natural "go to" person regarding mental health concerns.
- Colleagues with whom you would like to establish a mutual referral relationship. In other words, one in which the two of you make referrals to one another. Certain collegial relationships will be most promising in this regard. For example, individual and couples therapists, or adult and child therapists are good pairings. Another approach to mutual referrals is geographic such as pairing with a colleague whose practice is located in an adjacent, but somewhat distant town so that you can refer clients who live too far away to come to your office. Two EAP affiliated therapists might refer long term clients to one another, as appropriate. Clinicians

working in the same locale but participating in different insurance panels might also refer to one another.

Some of the best networking opportunities will result from following your interests and passions. While you may initially cast a wide net that introduces you to new people, you may ultimately focus in on nurturing the most compelling relationships. If you network with people you like, and network around activities and interests that you feel passionate about, your enthusiasm will shine through, and you may not even feel like you're working!

Networking “Wheres”

Meeting colleagues doesn't always have to happen over lunch. Feel free to be creative about networking venues! I enjoy walking the grounds of the local botanical gardens with some of my colleague-friends. There's no reason you couldn't meet with a colleague at a museum, a zoo, a bowling alley or a golf course. Do pick a venue and activity that allows for conversation and, if you anticipate discussing clinical issues, sufficient privacy. Most of us will make referrals to colleagues whose work we know and respect, so venues that provide an opportunity for others to get to know something about you and your work are more likely to be fruitful.

Networking “Whens”

Consider committing yourself to specific networking goals and a networking schedule. For example, you may want to plan to do one or two networking activities every month. Some clinicians prefer to do more intensive networking during the summer, when business is typically slow.

My rule of thumb: determine the number of available hours you have in your practice, and devote at least that many hours – every week – to marketing activities. Commit yourself to this by writing it down in your datebook, as you would if you were scheduling a client appointment. Devote some portion of that time to networking.

Networking “Hows”

Carry your business cards everywhere you go – not just when you're planning to network; I keep a few in my wallet. This way, you'll be prepared when serendipity strikes! If you are networking in advance of starting a practice (good for you!) and haven't yet secured an office, you can print business cards that identify the town or neighborhood where you plan to locate your office.

While you needn't (and shouldn't!) fill every moment talking about your practice, do plan to say something about your practice. In particular, prepare and practice how to comfortably say that you welcome new referrals. Consider practicing several variations on this, and practicing in the mirror or with a trusted friend or colleague. Sometimes it's easier to get the discussion started by asking the other person about her business or practice, and, if appropriate,

asking for her business card (chances are, she will ask for yours). I recommend that you aim for the middle road: you needn't take a “hard sell” approach, but you also don't want to neglect to mention your practice entirely! While some of the discussion should focus on “business,” some of it can also be about other things: politics, hobbies, the news – whatever interests you might have in common.

Prepare some ways that you might respond to the question “what's new?” It's often easier to make conversation about your practice if there's something you're working on: a new group you've started, an article you're writing, a new treatment method you've learned, a committee you've joined, or a niche you're developing. Even better: if you have a few things going on, you can select one or two that are most pertinent to the person you're networking with.

Think about what you have to offer, as well as what you want, from your networking encounters. Conceptualizing networking as a mutually beneficial relationship can help you to feel less greedy and desperate – and more comfortable - about networking. For example, what you have to offer might be referrals that you yourself cannot take or don't want. If you're comfortable doing short term counseling, consider becoming an EAP affiliate, which can provide more opportunities to make referrals to colleagues who, feeling grateful, may feel inclined to return the favor. There are many ways to craft a mutually beneficial relationship which needn't necessarily revolve around mutual referrals. For example, a dentist or surgeon might be happy to know a capable therapist who can help his anxious patients feel calm enough to complete the needed procedures. A cardiologist might feel relieved to have the name of a therapist skilled in treating panic attacks, and an estate lawyer or funeral director might feel good about connecting her grieving clients with a good clinician. In these situations, the benefit to the referral source may be the satisfaction of knowing that his client is in capable hands and, in some cases, feeling relieved not to have to handle a challenging emotional situation that's beyond the scope of their professional training.

Don't forget to maintain records of your networking activities and expenses – remember they may be tax deductible!

Networking with people and activities that you enjoy will not only help your practice to grow, but it will also keep you feeling involved and connected with your peers, counteracting the isolation that many clinicians complain accompanies private practice.

Lynne Spevack LCSW, is a practice building consultant in NYC and serves as Chairperson of the Private Practitioners Group for NASW NYC Chapter and is a member of the NASW-NYS Chapter's Managed Care Task Force. Lynne can be reached at: LynneSpevack@aol.com or 718-377-3400.