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## **Meaning Business**

By Keith Eric Grant, PhD, NCTMB

Around here, we have a term we use called proof of concept. Say one of us makes the observation, "Gray really works on that page." It may be true, but the statement is useless to the reader with a different page.

If the page is important, we'll make dozens of layouts in an effort to articulate why the gray "works." In analyzing these pages, we probe and expound - often out loud, with a dictionary - until we can fit words to what we see. When we're done, the statement has been transformed into, "Gray makes an image recede." It is now useful information, a statement of fact. This is a skill you can learn. More, it's a skill you must learn. If you can't articulate a problem, you can't actually solve it. (How will you know if it's solved? How will you explain what you've done?)

*- John McWade, graphic designer<sup>9</sup>*

Last fall, I spent a bit of time looking at California statistics for massage education and practice. Partly as an outgrowth of legislative activity and partly out of efforts by Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals (ABMP),<sup>1</sup> there was more raw data than normal lying around for me to nose through. One interesting item was the percentage of those entering massage practice that were still practicing five years later.

The data was broken down by hours of core education with a base of about 18,000 entrants per year - pretty solid for statistics. Five-year survival rates were 29.2 percent at a nominal 125 hours, 33.1 percent at about 250 hours, and 37.7 percent at a nominal 650 hours, the last category being 80 percent accredited career schools. The bad news is that the first doubling in training time only gave a 4 percent increase in survival rate and that the subsequent increase in training only contributed a 3.3 percent increase in survival per doubling of training hours.

This is a strong indication that what's being offered on the menu is at best tangential toward keeping people in the profession. The good news is that our statistics aren't devastatingly lower than general small-business statistics of about 45 percent survival at five years.<sup>4</sup> The additional good news is that you don't have to ride the averages - individual effort counts for a lot. There are things that will help you much more than hanging around a massage school without specific business and practice goals yet in place.

As the story of "The Princess Bride" goes, Westley's ship has been taken by the Dread Pirate Roberts, who never takes prisoners. Yet, moved by Westley's tale of needing to return for true love, Roberts does spare him to be his valet. Every night for three years, while Westley learns to fight and run a ship, Roberts says the same thing: "Good night, Westley. Good work. Sleep well. I'll most likely kill you in the morning."

Finally, Roberts reveals that he is not the original Dread Pirate Roberts, is now ready to retire and - after a bit of final mentoring - goes his way to leave Westley as the new "Roberts."

The story is about living on the edge as a new entrepreneur, employee or apprentice. If you don't mean business, if you don't pay attention, you won't see the following day. In an article on business survival, Angelo Valenti comments that "in the jungle, animals that are aware are called survivors, while animals that are just awake are called lunch."<sup>7</sup> He stresses paying attention to successes, failures and the environment in which they happen. You may practice massage to assist others, but you can only do that by developing and using good business sense.

Once you are consistent about pursuing a massage career, whether full-time or part-time, the next step is your first ad layout. This isn't about brochures and business cards; those come later. This is about the ad you are going to take with you on every interview, presentation or client contact; the one that will walk in on your own legs and that you will see in the mirror before and after. Likely the most important ad you will ever create is the presentation of yourself. It may be a maxim but it is still correct, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression."

Take the pointers available from SCORE (Service Corps of Retired Executives) to heart.<sup>6</sup> In particular, think about the context of a job interview or a client situation. Your goal should be to interface seamlessly with their world and needs. Unless you really are providing massage on a Florida lawn, emulate the chameleon, not the pink flamingo.

If you aren't feeling comfortable about business issues, don't panic and don't ignore the problem. There are a number of resources, training programs and opportunities for finding mentors that are available to you at little or no cost. Both online and through regions centers, SCORE answers questions, offers workshops, and provides mentoring.<sup>5</sup>

The U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) is a gateway to regional Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs), providing local assistance.<sup>10</sup> The SBA is also a gateway to Women's Business Centers.

Try and find a niche of practice and clientele that makes you special.<sup>2</sup> Look for opportunities within the social or work contexts with which you are already familiar and comfortable. When you identify a target niche, evaluate your training. If you have training gaps, you can now be specific about your needs and finding teachers who have mastery at what you want to do. You should be able to ask questions, and they should be able to give you specific answers about what you will gain.

Look again at the quote from John McWade at the beginning of this column. The focus of such training to application is what makes it worth your money and time.

If you aren't going to hire a designer, learn some basic design and copywriting yourself for brochure and business card layouts. There are good design books by both John McWade<sup>8</sup> and Robin Williams.<sup>11</sup> Copywriter Robert Bly has written several helpful books and has a number of articles on his Web site.<sup>3</sup> Remember that you are selling satisfaction of your client's concerns, not your technique collection. Reflect that in your approach and advertising. To create success, mean business, find your niche, and get the word out.

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