

YOUR  
FUTURE  
IS IN  
YOUR HANDS  
*literally*

By Art Riggs

**6 WAYS TO BUILD A FINANCIALLY &  
EMOTIONALLY REWARDING PRACTICE**







## I RECEIVE A LOT OF EMAILS

about some of the issues that come with establishing a practice—several practitioners happily report the gratification they are enjoying in growing a successful and emotionally rewarding practice, and quite a few say they have found success by combining spa work and a private practice. I want to pass on a few of these success stories, because it saddens me when I see people undervaluing their skills, not having confidence in their approach, or not visualizing their possibilities for success. Along the way, I will comment on some of the recurrent themes in these stories that are crucial for planning your long-term success.

There are plenty of books and articles on practice building. Business skills and advertising/promotion are helpful and important to get your clients in the door. But after that, your future is in your hands, literally. To me, the key is not looking outside for marketing expertise as much as looking inside to clarify a vision of just what type of work you have passion for, and the specifics of the practice you would like to have. What possible roadblocks are hampering that dream, and what steps can you take to empower yourself?

I'd like to share a letter I received from a student named Kenny whom I've had continued contact with for many years. Sometimes we talk about treatment-related questions, but we also discuss Kenny's vision of building a practice that is gratifying, both financially and emotionally.

*"Dear Art,*

*Your article in the March/April 2015 issue of Massage & Bodywork ["Where Are We Now?," page 74] about the massage profession reminded me of something we were discussing in one of your classes in 2008, right at the beginning of the recession.*

*I was shocked at your response, when you were asked how much one could hope to make in an established practice, and realized that I had no clear goals and had never considered making that much. I was selling myself short.*

*You did caution that it was crucial to recognize that income is only one factor in having a successful and fulfilling practice. You suggested that a therapist must have clarity in his long-term vision, realizing the things you can control and the things you can not (such as the economy, competition, and other factors), and distinguish your specific manual skills from the very different business and promotional skills, and especially distinguish yourself from the masses just doing massage routines.*

*The beginning of the recession really hurt my business, and I knew I had to keep my focus, keep a positive long-term attitude, and specialize to survive, while still working at a spa for consistent income.*

*Largely due to the techniques and concepts I learned from your classes, but also at your urging, I expanded to an eclectic view, studying Erik Dalton, Whitney Lowe, Til Luchau, Tom Myers, and others. I gained expertise and confidence, and built a reputation as the go-to therapist at the spa when people had problems.*

*Your emphasis on communicating with clients to find their needs was the most important skill. So many people expressed gratitude for my sincere interest when their previous experience had just been to jump on a table and have someone perform the same routine they used for everyone.*

*It took a few years to cut a day at a time from the spa as I built my private practice, but all the work was so much more gratifying anyway. Last year, I made the total transition to private practice and couldn't be happier. By the way, I easily surpassed that income you suggested, and I now have a lucrative profession ... not just a job!*

*The skills I learned from you and others were great, but I think having clarity in my goals, looking inside myself to find what was holding me back, and having a long-term plan are what did the trick."*

*Kenny*

LET'S LOOK AT SOME OF THE IMPORTANT THEMES BEHIND KENNY'S LETTER:

### NO. 1

## HAVE CLEAR LONG-TERM FINANCIAL GOALS

What started Kenny's process was having a specific financial goal. Once he was on that road, he began to work on the particulars of achieving that goal—especially the emotional conflict between the security of a spa job and the daunting prospect of establishing a private practice. I'd like to repeat what I told the class: income is only one aspect and by no means the only touchstone of a fulfilling practice. As a practice grows, it may be wise to realize when you are busy enough and to say no to the allure of ever-more income if you begin to feel a slave to our culture's overemphasis on financial success. I know quite a few therapists chasing the almighty dollar who bemoan their lack of leisure time, their fatigue, or even injuries from burnout.

## 2

### DISTINGUISH YOURSELF FROM THE FLOCK

It is so gratifying to see the excitement, fulfillment, and fun a friend I've been mentoring (whom I'll call Ophelia) is having in building her success. She began her practice 18 months ago and now regularly works on 15–20 private clients a week. Partly because her clients have admonished her for not charging enough, she raised her rates in January. Shortly after she began work at an athletic club, the woman who schedules appointments asked the manager, "What's the story with Ophelia? We've been having a lot of people calling and asking when she works to schedule appointments, rather than just booking a time."

Although somewhat shy and self-effacing, Ophelia does share some of her emails and comments from clients. Hardly a week goes by without a new client asking, "What do you call this work? It is totally different from most massages I've received." Although Ophelia does have an interest in deep tissue and myofascial release, in reality, she does a lot of relaxation work and isn't doing fancy sophisticated techniques. She is, however, always reading responses to her strokes by working and palpating at the same time, slowing down to pay special attention to areas that need it, and never performing rote or scripted routines. A typical comment is, "Nobody has ever had me lie on my side before; this is great! What is your schedule?"



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# 3

## TAKE STOCK OF YOUR STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Don't try to be better at doing the same massage as everyone else. Take inventory of your strong points and your passion, and find a niche. For some, it may be therapeutic work with injuries or athletic performance; for others, it may be energy work or having a deeper understanding of relaxation work. Become skilled working with clarity with the nervous system, and creating balance between the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, possibly with added skills in craniosacral therapy either as a specialization or an adjunct to regular massage.

Honestly assess your personality skills, both to work on improvement and to accept your basic nature to use to your advantage. For example, my science background, somewhat left-brain leanings, and high energy led me to Rolfing and a more therapeutic practice. However, my upbringing to try to be a good Cub Scout and have a warm and caring nature, along with a somewhat wacky sense of humor and ability to chat while working brings a close connections with clients and distinguishes my practice from a more Western medicine "white coat" ambiance that sometimes turns people off, as our profession seems to be moving toward imitating physical therapy.

## NO. 4

### EXPAND YOUR SKILLS

At first, Kenny wanted to build his practice around the techniques in my classes. I advised him to take other courses from different people and pick things from each teacher he could blend into a style truly his own. The varied skills he learned from his teachers were what distinguished him from more limited practices.

Another way to dramatically expand your skills is to get bodywork sessions from recognized experts to feel their touch and therapeutic vision. I once flew

to Santa Fe to get a session and tutoring from Jan Sultan, a Rolfing teacher I greatly admire. Michael Salveson, my favorite teacher in the Bay Area. I have to book months ahead of time, but I make it a point to get several sessions a year from him. I consider it a bargain, as I get fantastic work and the opportunity to try to translate the feeling from his magical hands into my own work.

Conversely, it is important to have specific strengths as the core of your work rather than being a jack-of-all-trades. I've seen some therapists

with practices that don't live up to their dreams actually taking too many continuing education classes, assuming that if they know more, they will be successful. Looking inside to the deeper issues that may be limiting us is often the key. As much as I'd hope that buying a few more fancy golf clubs would make me a better golfer, I'm afraid I really should look at my tendencies to overswing and lose concentration, and put pressure on myself by focusing on my weak points instead of developing my strengths.

# 5

## HONE YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Massage and bodywork is a very personal experience, and its success is based on a real connection between two people. We have all had the feeling that we are just a body lying on the table while the therapist performs a set routine and isn't present in a personal way. The most common complaint, especially in spa work, is that the therapist didn't listen to the client's wishes. Simply asking what your client is looking for is the first key, but to then actually *listen* and *accommodate* is crucial.

Don't forget your hands are also a major source of communication, not just in performing strokes, but also in reading where our clients hold tension. Ophelia recently asked a regular client if there were any special areas he would like her to work on, and he replied, "No, you always seem to find the areas that need it, even if I didn't know they needed it."

Following are some considerations for improving communication with your clients. Start by scheduling enough time for you to communicate and connect with clients. Abruptly sending a client out the door can damage





the special connection established during the session. An unhurried closure to a session is as important as the initial contact in order to leave a lasting positive impression in your client's memory.

It is sad to me that the "50-minute hour" is often the norm, especially at spas. A spa owner tells me she loves the 50-minute hour her competitors use: "When they come here and get a full hour, we have them hooked. We schedule with a little leeway so our therapist can actually find out what clients want and make a connection."

Communicate to your clients the benefits of longer sessions that combine an integrative full-body massage with spot work to address problem areas. In her early practice, Ophelia performed almost all 60-minute massages; now, about 70 percent of her clients choose longer sessions, with a great many choosing 75-minute sessions instead of 90-minute slots as a convenient compromise in time and money. Not only do her clients get better work, Ophelia is less tired and earns more income working on fewer clients.

A somewhat shy therapist recently told me he finally realized he had been hesitant to suggest longer sessions at his spa because he had an unconscious fear of appearing pushy, and most of his training had been in one-hour massages. He admits, "When I began offering longer sessions, I did have to learn to do more specific and detailed work rather than just stretching the session length by repeating more of the same old strokes. But now, I get so much more gratification really helping people, and a fair number of clients now get longer sessions and my rebooking numbers are much higher."

If you are limited to a "beat the clock" schedule, hone your bodyreading skills to be more efficient. Notice posture or restrictions in movement when they enter the room. Even a short time spent with the client sitting or standing up can inform you where they hold tension. Look for transmission of movement through different segments. Are strain patterns more anterior or posterior? How do the arms hang? Is there more tension in the legs or upper body?

Even a short window of time to make eye contact and exchange some verbal communication with your clients can establish a warm connection, rather than having clients jump on the table to not waste a minute of their time. There is no penalty for beginning the session with supine work and then turning to prone work and continuing as usual back to supine with a better view of what priorities you need to focus on. This allows for conversation about your clients' needs (no mumbling into a headrest) and enables you to assess breathing and tension patterns without sacrificing time.

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## 6

### DEVELOP EXCELLENCE IN THERAPEUTIC WORK

It bothers me when I hear therapists, with a bit of condescension, say, "I don't do relaxation work. I'm a bodyworker, and I do therapy." First, relaxation work is indeed therapeutic and has important benefits. However, virtually every person has something that needs extra work and will greatly appreciate it, not just to feel good, but sometimes to introduce dramatic change.

I often hear stories like this: a therapist friend has a client who initially came to her just for relaxation work, but when asked about any problem areas, the client said she had a "plantar plate tear" at the end of her metatarsals and she was going to have surgery in a couple of months, adding, "Is this something you feel comfortable working on?" After some research on the condition and with a holistic view of improving hip tracking, improving knee extension, and concentrated work on



improving proper foot mobility, the therapist proceeded. The client was amazed at the improvement (all in the context of a regular massage), especially since physical therapy and chiropractic had not helped. A couple months later, my friend received this postcard: "Today was the day I was supposed to have surgery, but instead, I walked five miles around Lake Tahoe, pain-free."

There is no need for a conflict between relaxation or therapeutic work, although each person can find a balance. Some therapists who specialize in fix-it work deprive themselves of the gratification of nurturing work and of regular clients who get the best of both worlds and return on a regular basis rather than just when they have problems. Being able to help clients with their problems is a great source of word-of-mouth referrals. Almost all of Kenny's and Ophelia's clients come from recommendations from people who love their warm and nurturing work but have greatly benefited from their skills working with problem areas.

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## YOUR DEFINITION OF YOUR PRACTICE

A successful bodywork practice is a bit like the movie *Field of Dreams*, where the hero builds a baseball field in the middle of a cornfield after his guide tells him, "If you build it, he will come."

In the early years of my Roling practice, I felt conflicted after taking a course in craniosacral work I greatly enjoyed. From my own preferences in the work I enjoyed receiving and what I assumed my clients expected from deep work, I feared my regular clients would be disappointed with more subtle work—basically, I had an identity crisis! Luckily, I took a deeper, more flexible look at myself and my work and decided I was willing to step out of my comfort zone, expand my skills, and broaden my client base to increase my success and love for my work.

Your work should be an expression of who you are as a complex human being. Some therapists shackle themselves with rigid limitations of their work, often based on narrow definitions and scripted routines in early training, and projections (often untrue) of what they think their clients like or expect. Kenny, Ophelia, and many other successful therapists attribute their success to their communication with clients after butting heads with their own limiting habits or mind-sets, especially breaking from the safety of scripted routines. **m&b**

**6** Art Riggs is a Certified Advanced Rolfer and massage therapist who's been practicing bodywork since 1988. He sells myofascial release videos and manuals, and teaches continuing education courses worldwide. Riggs is the recipient of the 2012 Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Massage Conference. For more information about his work, visit [www.deeptissuemassagemanual.com](http://www.deeptissuemassagemanual.com).

## WHAT IS YOUR KEY TO SUCCESS?

**Motivation**, knowing the closer I get to homeostasis the closer I am to living a life of health and wellness. Never giving up is my key to success.

**Latisha Banks**  
Facebook

Being passionate about what I am doing. **Skilled and well-trained.** Being present (for appointments and in the moment).

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