



# VIRTUAL ROUNDTABLE:

Experts Spill Their Secrets for Financial Success

**With a new year just around the corner, it's always a good idea to get your financial house in order.**

By Clare La Plante

Did you ever want to hire a business consultant, but didn't have the time or money to find one? Well, we've done it for you!

We called six experts—business professionals in a variety of fields—and asked them variations on the same five questions. Call it a free consultation, if you like—times six.

We spoke with an accountant, financial planner, life coach, marketing expert, records specialist and a massage therapist with 14 years experience. We asked each of them to share with us how to run a massage therapy business that is satisfying and rewarding, both financially and emotionally. (Following each interview, we also provide additional resources, or ways in which to implement the tips and challenges set forth by these experts.)

Let the roundtable begin!

Expert No. 1:

# Experienced Massage Therapist

**Who:** Neil E. Ackerman, owner of The Right Touch, practitioner of Swedish, Amma Therapy®, deep tissue, stress release massage, and also reflexology, CranioSacral<sup>SM</sup> and Myofascial Release®, among others.

**Where:** Plainview, New York

**What:** A massage therapist with 14 years experience

**Why:** To get the inside scoop on what works in this business

**How to Contact:** [Rttouch2@aol.com](mailto:Rttouch2@aol.com)

**Q** What are some of the biggest mistakes massage therapists make when they are starting out? How can they avoid these mistakes?

**A** One of the biggest mistakes is to rely just on themselves. Instead, ask advice from other massage therapists. If I was setting up a marketing class for massage therapists, it wouldn't just be on how to market yourself. It would also be what to expect in the business world. Don't undervalue yourself; have confidence in your abilities. There's nothing wrong with working with other therapists who have more—or less—experience. You can always learn! Always check in with the community around you.

For example, at a gym where I once worked, there were seven or eight therapists who would get together once a week and discuss questions that may not have come up in school. For example: What do you do if one of your clients gets sexually aroused? We also would work on each other.

You need to get involved with online groups and other massage therapists in your community. Don't be afraid to call and talk. Get together for exchanges. Talk with others. Don't just rely on yourself!

Massage therapy can be a tougher job for men; there is a lot of stereotyping out there. For male readers, just accept that you're going to encounter it, and don't let it bother you. It's the client's loss. Also, massage is still considered a luxury. When money is tight, it may be the first thing to go. It's good to have another job. I have a computer degree, and I'm also a musician. I work at a chiropractor's office, as well as have my own business.

**Q** What's the most concise advice you can give for the greatest results?

**A** Network! I have done all types of marketing, in every level, from flyers to ads. But networking gets the most powerful results. For example, when I networked, I found massage therapists who now work for me when I contract out. If you network, you're more likely to get a call, or get a job.

**Q** What steps can a massage therapist take to help ensure a secure financial future?

**A** As I mentioned, the most important step is to stay connected—always continue to network. Constantly keep up with your marketing, be dedicated and work hard. If you do these things and are good at what you do, you will get referrals. If you take care of your clients, you'll get referrals. Most new clients don't find massage therapists through the Yellow Pages. I've worked with several massage therapists who I wouldn't work with again. They weren't dedicated to their art.

You also need to have a positive attitude. If you're not working with a smile on your face, if you're not trying hard, and if you're talking about your own problems and not paying attention to the people you're working on, you won't get referrals.

It's also important to understand your clients. One thing I've always done is to treat each client as an individual. I gear my massage to each individual. There will be clients you like, and clients you don't like. Still, treat each client well.

Another important step is to be dedicated to yourself, too. Get regular massages. What better way to know it than constantly get them yourself? And stay in shape. At school, we had to take tai chi. They were teaching us to keep ourselves in shape. If you don't, you're going to get hurt.

And remember—it's always a good idea to keep learning. You can always learn more from others out there, which goes back to the concept of networking.

**Q** What is the purpose of a mentor, and how do you find one?

**A** The purpose of a mentor is to have someone you trust and look up to, someone you can go to when you have questions or problems. It may be a former teacher, a colleague or a doctor you work with. You don't have to take their words as gospel, but it can help a lot.

I talk to my mentor—a former teacher of mine—about clients I'm working on, or about family issues. Choose someone who accepts you and doesn't mind answering questions. It doesn't necessarily have to be someone older, just someone more experienced or knowledgeable in one area or another.

## Web Sites for Self-Care, Networking and Nutrition

[www.drweil.com](http://www.drweil.com) is the web site of über healer Andrew Weil, who has made a name—and fortune—by espousing all things holistic. This site is actually quite helpful, with free health tips e-mailed daily (if you sign up), folk remedies, health studies and, of course, products.

[www.iyengar-yoga.com](http://www.iyengar-yoga.com) allows would-be yogis to find an Iyengar yoga practitioner in their area (BKS Iyengar is the Indian yogi—still working hard at near 90 years old—who highlighted yoga as a therapeutic modality.) Iyengar yoga's emphasis on alignment and slow, methodical movement may suit massage therapists well. In fact, some incorporate Iyengar techniques into their massage practice. This web site also includes workshop listings, study materials and links to other Iyengar sites.

[www.herbs.org](http://www.herbs.org) provides helpful hints on herb usage, including accurate, science-based information on health benefits and risks.

[www.circleofhealers.com](http://www.circleofhealers.com) offers daily news and resources for the holistic healing community, including discussions, message boards and contact information.

[www.amyskitchen.com](http://www.amyskitchen.com) is the site of Amy's Kitchen, producer of organic frozen foods. This site contains recipes for those on special diets, or with special needs, including celiac disease, diabetes, lactose intolerance and dairy allergies. You'll also find a community section for discussions and postings.

Expert No. 2:

# Certified Public Accountant

**Who:** Frank Lee, CPA, CVA, of Weiss & Co., LLP

**Where:** Glenview, Illinois

**What:** A partner in an accounting firm

**Why:** To get tax tips that can help save money

**How to Contact:** c/o [www.weisscpa.com](http://www.weisscpa.com)

**Q** What are the most common accounting mistakes small business owners make? How can they best avoid them?

**A** They don't keep good records. And the problem with not keeping good records is twofold. One, you can't keep track of what's going on for yourself in terms of your business—how much income is coming in and what expenses are. Second, and maybe just as important, keeping good records helps for tax purposes by ensuring that you're getting all the deductions you're entitled to, and getting the right support for those deductions.

There are a lot of ways to organize and keep records. What's important is that you find a solution that works best for you based on your practice. It may be a simple filing system, a spreadsheet or a software program, such as QuickBooks. In many cases, recordkeeping might not be a skill you're familiar with, and therefore you don't have interest, experience or desire for it. Then it's worth the money to pay someone to help you take care of it.

**Q** What is the most concise piece of advice you can give about accounting that gets the greatest results?

**A** It goes back to recordkeeping: Keep good records in a system that works. I think this is really critical. Not only do you need accurate information, but you also need it on a timely basis. If you straighten out your records only once a year, you have a whole year's activity that may be too late to do anything about.

It's important to find out where you're spending your time and money so you can monitor that and make more money. What I've found is that a lot of small businesses operate on a reactive basis. They react to what's going on, and that may not be the most profitable thing to do. The way you arm yourself with information to make smart decisions is to keep good, timely records.

**Q** What accounting steps can a massage therapist take to help ensure a secure financial future?

**A** In terms of securing a future and saving taxes, the most important area is retirement planning. Make sure that you're establishing and participating in retirement plans. A number of choices are available. One of the most common for small business owners is a SEP Plan. It involves minimal paperwork and a maximum of deductions. With no other employees, it may be the most effective to use.

Another popular choice is a SIMPLE plan. As the name implies, it's supposed to be simple. It works like a 401(k) for small business, so if you have employees, they (and you) can participate. Traditional and Roth IRAs are still available, too.

Second, fund your retirement plan to the fullest extent possible. You're saving taxes as well as putting money aside for retirement; it doesn't get any better than that.

Again, make sure you're getting all the deductions you're entitled to. Common areas to focus on will be travel, auto expenses, home office expenses and supplies. Also, remember to include equipment of all kinds—from computers to massage tables.

**Q** What are the three touchstones to effective accounting practices?

**A** In a different version of real estate's "location, location, location," I say "discipline, discipline, discipline." You must establish a system and stick with it. A lot of people set up a system for maintaining their accounting system, but they don't stick with it. It has to work for you, and you have to stick with it. If you put it off, you tend to get behind, and it becomes more difficult to catch up.

So establish a plan and a system, and stick with it and maintain it. Also, know how to read and understand that system and how to use that

information. The accounting records provide a snapshot of what's going on with your business—how much your business is generating, whether it is seasonal and what you should budget for, etc. You need to have a plan.

**Q** What is the purpose of an accountant?

**A** Accountants will help a client with all of those things I've mentioned so far, in addition to guidance for how to interpret numbers and ways to be more proactive in managing the business. Accountants also will be available to answer questions and to encourage you. They will help you get a system for backing up your records, and make sure that everything you need is available.

**Q** How does one find the right accountant? How much should one spend?

**A** It varies. A certified public accountant (CPA) offers a variety of levels of services, so cost will be based on where the need is, and what experience is being applied. It can range from basic bookkeeping, to producing financial statements, to producing audited financial statements.

The higher level of service is more expensive. Many small business owners don't need audits, but turn to a CPA for his or her overall experience. At the lower end, for simple bookkeeping, CPAs can equip clients with software so they can do recordkeeping themselves to help lower their costs. The more a client can do, the less expensive it will be.

Costs are so varied, so to give a number would be meaningless. For many, it would be less than \$1,000; for many others, it will be much more than that.

When shopping for an accountant, the first question you need to ask yourself is, "What kind of help do I need?" Are you more of a take-charge person who will use an accountant just to help out? Or do you need someone who will basically take care of everything? What do you really need?

When interviewing accountants, find out what level of service they can provide, and then what their background and experience is.

# Comparing Different Retirement Plans

## SEP IRA

**Yearly contribution limits:** \$42,000, or 20 percent of self-employment income, or 25 percent of salary if you have a corporation.

**Benefits:** Employers can contribute on behalf of employees, and can deduct contributions. 100 percent immediate vesting.

**Penalties/Drawbacks:** Employees are not allowed to contribute.

## Simple IRA

**Yearly contribution limits:** \$10,000 salary deferral (\$12,000 for those 50 and older), plus 3 percent of compensation.

**Benefits:** Employer contributions are generally deductible. Assets grow tax deferred under withdrawal.

**Penalties/Drawbacks:** Early withdrawals—before age 59½—are penalized with a 10 percent tax, plus regular income tax.

## Keogh IRA

**Yearly contribution limits:** 20 percent of income, or \$42,000.

**Benefits:** Can be designated profit-sharing plan, or defined benefit plan.

**Penalties/Drawbacks:** Fees can be expensive, and the IRS demands an annual report.

## Roth IRA

**Yearly contribution limits:** \$4,000 for singles, \$8,000 for couples. You can contribute an extra \$500 if you are 50 or older as of December 31, 2005.

**Benefits:** Contributions grow tax free.

**Penalties:** You must pay taxes on any earnings that you withdraw early.

Expert No. 3:

# Life and Business Coach

**Who:** Maria Marsala, owner of Elevating Your Business

**Where:** Poulsbo, Washington

**What:** A life and business coach

**Why:** To get quick coaching tips on life and business

**How to Contact:** [www.coachmaria.com](http://www.coachmaria.com)

**Q** What are the most common mistakes small business owners make? How can one best avoid them?

**A** The biggest mistakes that I see people make is that they aren't niched, and they don't create business plans before they start their business. For example, they don't pick ideal clients—people who have money to pay them, who really want their service, would come back for more when they need it, and would refer them.

When I speak to a lot of new business owners, and I ask them who their clients are, they usually say, "Anybody who is breathing." They're afraid that if they get very specific, that they won't get any clients, but actually it's the other way around. The more specific they can get, the more people will remember what they do.

I didn't create a business plan when I first started my business because I didn't need funding. But I learned from this mistake—a business plan helps you get focused. It also helps to take a look at what problems you may have down the line.

**Q** What is the most concise piece of advice you can give from a business/life coaching perspective that gets the greatest results?

**A** Don't be a lone ranger. For the things you don't like doing, such as paperwork, hire someone to do it as soon as you start making money. Go to networking meetings with other massage therapists, as well as others outside of the business. Don't do business alone. Don't think that because you're in business, you can't ask for help.

**Q** What steps can a massage therapist take to ensure a secure financial future?

**A** I think the biggest thing is to look at business as a business. Most massage therapists are excellent at what they do, but they may go out of business because they don't get help with the business part.

I also talk to massage therapists about creating a niche—about focusing on what they bring to business that's unique.

**Q** What are the three touchstones to effective business planning?

**A** I believe you have to separate your business from your personal life, even if you're passionate about your business. So, first have a life—you need to fill that cup with energy.

Second, you need to set boundaries. I know a lot of massage therapists who are afraid to set business hours. That doesn't help your cause.

Third, keep your offices friendly and well-lit, because I've actually gone to offices that are so dark that it wasn't comfortable. Take the time to arrange your offices in a friendly way, thinking about the clients you are going to have.

**Q** What is the purpose of a life coach?

**A** Somebody would work with me because they're looking to make more money, or they're working way

too many hours, and they're not making enough money. They're usually tired and overwhelmed. Not with the massage part, but with the business part.

**Q** How does one find the right life coach? How much does it cost?

**A** I think you need to ask people you know for referrals, and meet with three different coaches to get a feel for how they work. You want to know about their background. Find out how many years they have been in business.

Ask for referrals. Every coach has some clients who he or she can give as referrals that your potential clients can check. I also would ask for a mini-session. I don't do free consultations, but I

do a mini-session on the phone. You want somebody who you feel can take you to the next level and beyond what you're doing. You want to feel that when you talk to the person that he or she is listening to you and hearing you.

As far as cost goes, it really depends—you can spend by the month or by the hour. A coach can cost you anywhere from \$100 an hour to \$1,000 an hour. Most coaches offer different types of plans. I have hourly rates; I also have monthly plans with unlimited e-mail coaching—you get phone or e-mail coaching. It's good to see what additional things somebody has to offer you. I have a special section on my web site just for my clients, where they can visit 24 hours a day. Usually, for good coaching, it's a minimum of \$400 a month.

## Questions Your Office Has Been Meaning To Ask You

**Do I smell great to you?**

Think about buying some candles, incense, essential oils or an aromatherapy lamp. Don't forget to open the windows every now and again, too!

**How private am I?**

If you don't have any privacy, find a way to create some. Even if your office is a corner area, there are ways to make it private.

**How do I feel?**

Cozy, open, bright, warm, full...whatever feels good to you! Make your office feel that way, too.

**Where are your personal items?**

Many years ago, it was not "professional" to have family pictures on your desk. Now that you own your office, you can do what you like!

**How is my wall treatment?**

If your office needs repainting or new wallpaper, set aside the money and time to get it done. Consider hanging pictures or posters you enjoy looking at.

**Is my desk arranged to promote my brilliance and creativity?**

If you can arrange your desk so you can sit and see out the window, or into the rest of the house, do it!

**How do my windows look?**

Clean curtains, shades and windows add to the feel of any room, including your office.

**Have you cleaned out my files and desk in the past year?**

Make room for the new by cleaning out the old. Throw away paperwork if you know you'll find current information on the Internet or at the library.

**Where is my supply cabinet or closet?**

The closer these items are to your office, the fewer items on your "to complete" list.

**Am I organized to your liking?**

Visit [www.theresourcequeen.com/books](http://www.theresourcequeen.com/books) for a list of organization, feng shui design and clutter control books.

## Expert No. 4: Records Expert

**Who:** Teri Mark, author of *Organize Your Office: A Small-Business Survival Guide To Managing Records*, and state records manager for Nevada

**Where:** Carson City, Nevada

**What:** a certified records manager

**Why:** For tips on organizing your office and your records

**How to Contact:** [tjmark@clan.lib.nv.us](mailto:tjmark@clan.lib.nv.us)

**Q** What organizational steps can a massage therapist take to ensure a secure financial future?

**A** Basically, make sure that all your important documents are well protected and backed-up. You can back up everything on a computer, or you can store important documents off-site; a good rule of thumb is in a place 25 to 50 miles away. All small business owners must think about if their primary location was destroyed, what would they need to set up business again? It would likely be your accounts receivable and information on clients. Certainly the client list is a very valuable asset.

**Q** What are the three organizational touchstones to effective financial planning?

**A** The first is coming up with a routine for organizing your records. The second is knowing what records you need to hold onto. The third is knowing that it's OK to throw things away—not letting things collect so that it's overwhelming. (A fourth is keeping everything in good condition!)

**Q** What is the purpose of a certified records manager?

**A** A certified records manager can help you with business records. To find one, visit the Association for Information Management Professionals at [www.arma.org](http://www.arma.org).

When interviewing records managers, you may ask what other clients they've had who have the same issues as you do. Also, ask if they've had experience with what you're asking them to

do, and if you can have references. Also, ask about their main strengths in organization.

For under \$1,000 you should be able to get someone to organize your records. You also may want to check out a professional organizer, someone who will organize anything you want—from your spice drawer to helping you move and unpack. To find a professional organizer, you can visit the National Association of Professional Organizer's web site at [www.napo.net](http://www.napo.net). You can look up organizers in your own area.

**Q** What are the most common mistakes small business owners make? How can they best avoid them?

**A** I think that not dealing with incoming mail and important documents that can pile up is a common mistake. Then, when it comes time to find something, you can't.

The best way to avoid this is to set up daily and weekly routines. For example, when mail comes in, deal with it immediately. Another tip is to set up a 1 to 31 file—put it in that day, and check it daily. A 1 to 31 file is an accordion file—also known as a tickler file used to “tickle” your memory—with one slot for each day of the month. You can find them at your local office supply store. You just drop material into the particular date you have to do something with it.

**Q** What is the most concise piece of advice you can give about recordkeeping that gets the greatest results?

**A** Protect your assets. You have to know what's of value to your small business. If everything were to disappear through a natural or man-made disaster, what would you need to start up your business again? That's what is of value to your business.

You can protect your assets through organization. If you can't find something, it may as well be gone. It's another form of loss. It can disadvantage you as much as loss through fire.

All of those important records need to be taken care of, and in a location where you can

find them easily. If you can't put your finger on it in the first 15 seconds, it doesn't make you look very professional.

Every record has a life cycle: It is used, stored and then disposed of. Keep a system together so that you can routinely destroy outdated records. It's good practice.

# A Sample Filing System

## YOUR OFFICE SPACE...

First, decide on broad categories according to the particular work materials in your office. Then, file alphabetically or chronologically within these categories.

**Business files:** Licensing and certification records, including all of the supporting documentation

**Financial files:** Accounting, insurance, property, equipment and tax records

**Sales/Marketing:** Promotional items, events and publicity

**Client files:** Information maintained on each client

**Action files:** A 1-31 accordion file for each day of the week. These are items that need action by a given date: client or prospective client follow-up information; appointments, directions and other materials needed; bills to pay; event tickets; invitations; RSVPs; registrations; greeting cards; meeting agendas;

and support materials; sale flyers, coupons; travel tickets, itineraries and reservations.

**Reading files:** A collection of articles, reports and long e-mails. Rip articles out of magazines and/or print long e-mails and file them to read when time allows.

## YOUR PERSONAL WORK SPACE...

Weed through all papers that have been collecting and trash anything that is expired or not vital to your existence. Move the rest into a reading or action folder or file it. Other suggestions:

- Toss outdated reading materials such as journals and magazines that are older than six months. If you find an article you would like to read, rip it out and place it into your reading folder.
- Toss catalogs and sales brochures in which you have no interest.
- Toss old business cards and update your contact database.

# Protecting Your Document Assets

When we hear the word disaster, we normally think of the major disasters we read about in newspapers such as earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, fires, tornadoes and terrorist attacks. Just as devastating, but with greater likelihood, are the small, localized disasters such as:

- Computer viruses, hardware failures, disk drive crashes;
- Human error, human sabotage;
- Theft, vandalism;
- Leaky or broken water pipes;
- Toxic mold;
- Power fluctuations, including power outages, power spikes and brownouts;
- Insect and rodent infestation;
- Coffee, soft drinks or food spilling onto documents or into computers.

Remember all the fire drills you had to go through in elementary and high school? They were necessary for students, teachers and other school employees to know what to do if a fire started. The same precautions apply in business as well. You need to have a plan and practice it so that you know what to do if an emergency occurs.

Here are some questions you need to be asking yourself. You should know the answers to these questions before a disaster happens.

1. In the event of a disaster, who should be notified of a work slowdown or stoppage? Clients? Colleagues? Suppliers? Dealers? Contractors? Do you have this contact information? Where is it located?
2. If the office or facility is uninhabitable, where will you relocate? Who has the authority to set up this site? What supplies, equipment and software are needed at this site? What records will you need and where are these backups located?
3. If the office or facility became unstable, e.g., from an earthquake or explosion, but you were allowed back into the area for a 10-minute retrieval and recovery period, what would you retrieve? Do you know exactly where these items are located?
4. Do you have insurance information available? Do you have photographs or other identifying information of your insured assets, such as model numbers and year purchased? If so, where are they stored?
5. Do you have bank account and loan information available? Where is this information?
6. What legal concerns could arise? Do you have succession instructions? Where is this information? Would a power of attorney be necessary? If so, who can arrange for it?

# Sample Vision Statement

Set a goal to create a one-sentence vision statement. The vision statement describes what you expect your business, department or branch to look like in a measurable number of years. It might go something like this:

Within the next year I intend to grow (your company name) into a(n) (adjective that fits your business, such as successful, premier, local, regional, international, global, etc.) type of company, providing (describe products, services, functions, roles, etc.) to (describe target customer) with (quantity) sales.

## 5 Simple Rules For Organizing Your Office

**1 Know which documents you need.**  
Make a list of the supporting documents you need to obtain or maintain your business license and certifications.

**2 Keep your documents accessible.**  
The goal of every filing system is to provide quick and accurate access to information; in other words, to find records and information. A good system will result in faster retrieval, fewer misfiles, less time spent filing records and fewer lost documents.

**3 Protect your document assets.**  
Document assets are those records that are vital to the continuation of your business. Such records are necessary to re-create your legal and financial status and to determine your rights and obligations. Keep these documents in either a safe deposit box, a fireproof safe or distribute copies in a location that is separate and away from your primary place of business. Tell

family members how to access this information in the event you are unreachable when it is needed.

**4 Keep after it.** Don't allow documents to pile up. Every document that comes across your desk requires an immediate action of some type. Take a few moments once or twice a week to sort and file your paperwork. Allowing these documents to accumulate only creates a larger, more intimidating chore.

**5 Shred it!** With identity theft on the rise, it is important that you shred fiscal and client records, and anything with social security numbers, bank account numbers, credit card numbers, credit card promotions and other personal information. Your local office supply store likely offers many low-cost, cross-cut shredders about the size of an office wastebasket. This simple investment will go a long way in safeguarding you and your clients.

Expert No. 5:

# Communications/ Marketing Professional

**Who:** Richard Abraham, author of *Mr. Schmooze: The Art and Science of Selling Through Relationships*

**Where:** Oak Brook, Illinois

**What:** A marketing professional

**Why:** For tips on building your business through making good client relationships.

**How to Contact:** [rabraham@richardabraham.com](mailto:rabraham@richardabraham.com)

**Q** What are the biggest marketing mistakes small business owners make, and how can they avoid these?

**A** One of the most common mistakes is that people rush the communications process—they muscle it. Perhaps they feel they only have a certain amount of time with someone, and they feel they have to close the deal or they won't get another chance.

When it comes to massage therapy, there is a sequencing that has to take place. You don't want to get too intimate too fast—asking personal questions too aggressively, for example. You must ease into it. Let it happen. Understand how to ask disarming questions first. Marketing people are taught to ask open-ended questions, as opposed to a yes or no question. For example, what do you like best about your work? Or the “best of all worlds” questions: In the best of all worlds, where would you be living five years from now? It gets people's imaginations working and brings on an emotional give and take.

The second mistake is to ignore the emotional undertones of communication. The marketing process is two communication games at the same time: You're trying to sell a service, and the parallel game is to reach out and touch a deeper emotional chord, to appeal to the needs that people have.

**Q** What is the most concise piece of advice that you can give for the best marketing results?

**A** Market benefits instead of features. For example, I'm going to buy shoes, and I'm self-conscious about my big feet. The shoe salesman waxes poetic about the color of the shoe or its resilience. These are all features

that do not provide a benefit for me at that point in the conversation.

If you say, “That shoe looks great on you, it makes your feet look smaller”—that would work as a benefit and is a stronger selling point.

If you say, “We're great massage therapists, with 10 years of experience,” that is a feature. But if you say, “We specialize in golfers with bad backs and have a tremendous track record in lowering golfers' handicaps,” then that is a benefit. Benefits are what the game is all about!

**Q** What marketing steps can a massage therapist take to ensure a secure financial future?

**A** The first step is to understand a key element in marketing—there are opportunities to build a relationship that aren't necessarily related to the business at hand, but instead involve making a connection to the broader subject of the other person's life.

What I mean by that is that you may be in the massage business, but the other person may be wrestling with whether to put her mother in a nursing home or enroll her child in private school. So alert relationship builders will be continuously paying attention to what is important to their clients at any given moment, and then will use their networking skills or referral skills to help a particular client. The key is to network and have as many good connections as one can.

If you become sensitized to this way of thinking, you might be surprised at how much you know and how much you can help a person along a broad spectrum of issues.

**Q** What are the three touchstones to effective marketing?

**A** The first is benefit selling—or the communication of real benefits. The second is the ability to connect emotionally with another person, to actually be proactive when an emotional or life issue comes up. That process is so much more satisfying to clients than what most service providers do.

The third is making your message holistic. From the massage therapy point of view, I like the dual concept of mind and body. For example, there may be a stereotype that a person only gets a massage when he or she pulls a muscle. Let your clients know that's just the tip of the iceberg: "Come on in and we will make you feel better physically, and you will also have an opportunity to meditate and clear your mind." There's a lot coming together in

massage beside the obvious, which I don't see being promoted.

**Q** What is the purpose of a communications adviser? How much do their services cost?

**A** The purpose is to convert information that the business owner wants to convey to the market into an emotionally charged message that moves people to act.

This service can range from \$100 to \$1,000 an hour, which may be too expensive for many small business owners. However, the Internet is awash with great information. There are lots of good books, including my own *Mr. Shmooze*, *Blink* by Malcolm Gladwell and *Mind Read Your Customers* by David P. Snyder.

## Mr. Shmooze's 5 Rules for Marketing\*

- Selling is a part of life, because selling is really the art and science of a much higher subject. The subject is life. Everyone communicates, listens, attempts to persuade, all day, every day of his or her life.
- Start with yourself. Start each day with this mantra: "The happier I can make myself, the happier I can make other people. The happier I make other people, the more I get paid."
- Be passionate about what you do. We can create passion anywhere, and it is the emotion, not the setting, that is key.
- Make an emotional connection. When you call on a new prospect or a precious, existing customer, no matter what, just make sure one thing happens: When she thinks of you, she thinks of something good—something warm. Add to her day somehow by giving her something— information, a small gift, a compliment.
- Sell benefits. Be able to clearly and quickly explain how your product and services will personally benefit the buyer, in memorably graphic and provable terms.

\*Adapted from *Mr. Shmooze: The Art and Science of Selling Through Relationships*, by Richard Abraham, 2002.

## Expert No. 6:

# Financial Planner

**Who:** Bob Mecca, CFP, MBA, RIA

**Where:** Northbrook, Illinois

**What:** A fee-only financial planner

**Why:** To get tips on building an effective business

**How to Contact:** [bob@MeccaOnMoney.com](mailto:bob@MeccaOnMoney.com)

**Q** What are the most common mistakes small business owners make? How can they best avoid them?

**A** One common mistake is a failure to provide a business plan. Many small business owners who I come across just come up with an idea and then let emotions take it from there.

The second mistake is that many businesses tend to leverage too much. They may overextend themselves with debt, whether a home equity line of credit or a small business loan. Right away, even before the doors are open, there is a burden. Now that we are in a rising interest rate environment, it becomes more expensive.

It's easy to avoid the first mistake: You need to write a business plan. You should create a best-case scenario and a worst-case scenario. The reality will probably fall between the two.

You're not actually planning for the worst; it's a contingency plan. You always want to think positively—those who succeed think positively. They don't think of failure. But you need to understand that things don't always go as planned.

To avoid the second mistake—leveraging too much—do your homework, and understand what your biggest capital outlay is. And do you have a Plan B? Perhaps you might not get the most up-to-date equipment; perhaps that might not even be needed. You might first buy yours secondhand. I liken it to moving out of rental property to owning a house. Do you buy an \$800,000 house first? Usually, you buy the \$200,000 house first, gather your assets, build your bank account, and let the house appreciate before you take the next step. So put a cap on your leverage. See what you can afford to pay back on a monthly basis.

**Q** What is the most concise piece of advice you can give about financial planning that gets the greatest results?

**A** I learn from those who come to me and say, "Bob, I wish I had done this sooner." In a nutshell: Get started today. The first step is to invest as little or as much as you can each paycheck.

**Q** What steps can a massage therapist take to help ensure a secure financial future?

**A** First, you need to realize that you're not going to be able to work forever. This leads to the second step: You need to set aside money now to pay for future living costs. Your third step is to develop wealth accumulation and wealth preservation strategies.

Wealth accumulation is basically investing, and wealth preservation is basically insurance. To use sports vernacular: No one wins with just good offense or defense—investing is offense; insurance is defense. Protect your health through medical insurance. Protect your income through disability insurance. Protect your family against loss of life through life insurance. Protect your assets in case of catastrophe with property, home and auto insurance. Have the right stuff.

The key is not to pay too much for preservation. You may need help from someone who does not work on commission and who doesn't sell anything.

**Q** What are the three touchstones to effective financial planning?

**A** List your goals. Implement a plan. Monitor progress. When I meet with people about listing goals, in general—whether they have money or not—they don't think about the future. I say, "What about needing money for a car?"

"Oh, yeah, but that's not until next year," they will reply.

# CLIENT Bill of Rights

When choosing a financial planner, make sure the following apply:

- Your personal interests are first and foremost.
- The planner has the essential credentials necessary to provide quality professional work.
- You trust the planner to be professional, courteous, sincere, sensitive and respectful.
- No product is sold.
- No service is suggested if not needed.
- You know in advance how the process works, what is expected and the fee.
- There are no hidden fees; no hidden agendas.
- The fee is competitive and reasonable.
- No client is accepted unless potential payback can be identified.
- All information remains confidential.
- In this partnership, you will be taught—as opposed to being told—what to do.
- Honest attempts will be made to answer questions and explain concepts to help make you an informed investor.
- He or she is responsive in a timely manner to the extent possible.
- You are free to work with other professionals as you desire.
- You have the ultimate, full control over your money.

They see it as long-term—but it's not. People have to realize that unless they inherit money, you just don't wake up one day and say, "That's it, I'm going to retire, or I won't work anymore and I will live a good lifestyle."

People who fail to plan are the ones who are miserable. They have to do things they don't want to do. If you plan ahead, even though plans don't always go as we would like, you will usually achieve financial freedom. List your goals. Create a timeline and insert dates when money is needed.

**Q** What is the purpose of a financial planner?

**A** My business card doesn't say financial planner; instead, it reads "fee-only life planning consultant." That means a lot. Life-planning consultant means I help people throughout all stages of life. I help people recognize goals, financial strengths and weaknesses, and I show them the best way to become financially independent.

The purpose of a plan is to help people financially succeed. I also help people with cash flow by helping them set up a budget. Sometimes I help with tax reduction strategies; other times, I help with setting up estates—simple wills and power of attorney documents.

**Q** How does one find the right financial planner? How much should one spend?

**A** You should look for someone certified (a CFP), who is fee-only (doesn't charge commission), has experience, is a good teacher and a good partner.

My own fees are predicated on work that I do with each client. I say, "It will take me X hours, and here's my fee, and here's the return you can expect to get." Typically, in the industry, hourly fees range \$175 to \$250, although it's hard to give a set number.

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Clare La Plante is a freelance writer based in Evanston, Illinois. A columnist for *MTJ*, she has contributed articles to a number of national business publications. She is the author of *Wall Street on a Shoestring* (Avon Books, 1998). LaPlante can be reached at: [CRLaPlante@aol.com](mailto:CRLaPlante@aol.com).