

GOOD HANDS BY ANNET KING

KNOW THY NICHE

Do you think the entire world is your potential market? In a very real sense, you are correct—after all, everyone has skin. But, as a skin care professional, what are you going to do to stand out from the crowd and be recognized?

It's social and professional Darwinism at its most unforgiving, because competition is keen. To survive, you need to meet or exceed client expectations. To truly thrive, you must master key specialties and build your reputation on this mastery—leaving the merely competent far behind.

The trend in American culture reflects a broad-based movement away from the bland, giant monoculture—McDonald's, The Gap, Target, Starbucks—and its sprawling, impersonal corporate agenda. People want to go where everybody knows their name, and they long for a niche-based economy.

To attract and build a powerful niche clientele, think small—focus on no more than three niches or demographic market segments that speak to your business. (See **Niche Concerns**.) These could be diverse, such as men who golf, women age 40 and older, or teens preparing to go to college. They all represent differing needs in skin care. It's a challenge, and a joy, to get inside their minds and give them what they want. This kind of specific, targeted personal tailoring of your marketing message not only builds loyalty within identified market segments, but also creates invaluable word-of-mouth advertising which will, in turn, bring new clients to your door. Just as you need to think of the macro-market as a honeycomb of many smaller, individual markets with very specific requirements, you also need to specialize your own skills.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING A NICHE

Competition is tough. With so many spas, skin care centers and salons in the United States, it's a veritable candy store, and clients have many options about where to take their business. A ruling principle of business is that it is less costly to retain clients than it is to hunt down and capture new ones. Still,



with time, much of your own client base will drift away—often through no fault of your own. So, you constantly must replenish your business with new clients to replace those who generally are lost due to attrition in order to retain your current base. If your business consists of two-thirds long-term, retained clients, congratulations—obviously you are doing a lot of “somethings” right! But continuing to retain those clients is the challenge.

Keep in mind that it's cheaper to hold on to a client than to attract a new one. So, it makes sense to woo and wow existing clients continually, as well as to reach out

continues on page 104

NICHE CONCERNS

Going after one or more of these market segments? Following are some popular niche populations' chief concerns—use them as the platform for your marketing outreach.

SUPERWOMAN. She always is checking her watch and silencing her cell phone. Any woman who works outside her home and has a child younger than 18 may qualify.

Chief concern. Lack of time. If you make a service worth her while, she'll part with serious cash. If not, to quote Donald Trump, "You're fired." Forget the rose petals and gold dust facials. This woman, who often is an executive, entrepreneur or powerful decision maker, isn't looking for frivolous offerings. Express treatments are one approach—but, most importantly, design a menu that delivers reliable, solid results.

PROM QUEEN—She's barely off her Big Wheel, but she's suddenly serious about her skin—and spends every dollar she can earn or guilt-trip from her parents.

Chief concern. Acne. Hopefully, young clients aren't dealing with heavy-duty cystic acne—this requires medical attention. Because of this and other major skin care problems that can arise, be sure to form an alliance with an excellent dermatologist who specializes in acne.

With young clients, learn about their lifestyle in order to develop a skin care strategy. In addition to hormones, inexpensive and highly comedogenic skin care products and makeup, as well as gooey hair products that build up on the pillowcase, often are the culprits, so teen clients are a prime market for non-comedogenic retailing. Debi Byrnes, a former skin care therapist and "acne survivor" in Los Angeles,

helps a national pilot program, Clear Up Skin Care, dedicated to addressing teen skin problems and self-esteem. This non-profit program currently is offered in public middle school classrooms, but may inspire your ideas for drawing the teen market to your skin care center. Log on to www.clearupskincare.org for more information.

Also, teen clients often are interested in tanning. This is a prime time to educate them about the long-term dangers of UV exposure and proper use of sunblocks. Teens also are great candidates for exfoliating and spray tanning packages, especially around prom time and graduation.

MEN. While he may wince at being called a metrosexual, today's guy is far more open to skin care services than he ever dreamed possible. Remember that he is still a little freaked out about being at a spa, so be sure that your beds, chairs, robes and slippers can accommodate him, sizewise; flouncing around in a pink floral smock that barely covers him will not enhance his experience.

Chief concern. Looking younger.

Sound familiar? Men will come right out and tell you that it's a jungle out there, both personally and professionally. Many men find themselves single—often for the second or third time—in their 50s and beyond, so caring for themselves takes on an added urgency. Likewise in the job market, mergers, takeovers and downsizing make it clear that job security, like his formerly tight hairline—and waistline—is a thing of the past. He may be competing for the job with guys half his age, who have twice his formal education. Ouch. Treatments and a simple at-home regimen

that exfoliates and moisturizes to minimize sun damage and wrinkling will give him vitality and confidence.

ETHNIC SKIN. If a client's ancestry is Native American or includes another indigenous ethnicity, such as Australian Aborigine, African/African-American or Asian, including India, Pacific Islander, Latin/Hispanic or Middle Eastern, this information becomes an invaluable part of the skin treatment approach.

Chief concern. Hyperpigmentation. Even the fairest, lightest, creamiest non-Anglo skin will respond differently to trauma than an equally light Northern European skin. In this sense, skin color can be misleading.

To generalize, non-Anglo skin will form a dark scar when it is pierced or otherwise injured, even by a minor scratch, blemish or burn, making extractions a definite risk. To win the loyalty of the ethnic client, demonstrate your understanding of the challenge, and offer alternatives to conventional procedures that might result in hyperpigmentation, including microdermabrasion, waxing and most laser treatments. Also welcome are alternatives to irritating hydroquinone for lightening existing areas of hyperpigmentation.



continued from page 102



It is less costly to retain clients than it is to hunt down and capture new ones.

to potential new market segments. What makes your facility and your service special, and what will keep your established client base loyal and re-booking?

You must land on what marketing types call a USP—a Unique Selling Proposition. But is anything really unique? Isn't a good, solid double-cleansing exfoliation, European-style massage and regenerating mask sort of universal?

Actually, no. There is nothing on this Earth exactly the same as your two hands, your touch, your specific tactile vocabulary, your own expertise and the treatment room experience only you can create. Focus on what really defines you as a professional, and perhaps even as a person. Resist the urge to reach for gimmicks—you don't need a neon navel ring to be special. Spend some quality time identifying what makes you and your practice unique.

While it's a must to be competent in all key areas and to possess strong general skills, it is equally powerful to possess one or two keen professional passions. Maybe you take pride in performing the most pain-free extractions in the tri-state area, giving the fastest bikini wax in the West, or the great education you provide to your clients. Ask colleagues and even a few long-term clients what they think makes you and your practice special in order to kick-start your

process. Ask them how they would describe you to a friend. What do they say when they are recommending you?

THE CASE AGAINST LUXURY

Experiential escapism is the new indulgence. Luxury and pampering are passé as marketing positions, although the market is filled with them—caviar masks for the face, crushed diamond dust pedicures and champagne body treatments. Not only do they not offer additional results—from a marketing stance, luxury as a selling platform is very old-school, very Zsa Zsa Gabor, and just not in tune with modern sensibilities. Keep this in mind when appealing to various population niches.

Females in their 30s and 40s are, of course, the bedrock market of the typical spa. These are successful women who prosper in business, in their relationships, in raising a family and in social settings. They indeed may drive a Lexus, ski in Aspen, enjoy bicoastal residences and sling a Prada bag over their Pilates-toned shoulders, but, while they may have money to burn, the one thing they don't have is time to waste.

For this reason, the luxury concept no longer clicks culturally. Women are not in the mindset to loll around in something called "indulgence" or "pampering," which promises nothing more than a pastel, *Valley of the Dolls* level of sedation. This niche wants quantifiable results. They view their skin care the way they view fitness—as a practical means to a tangible end. If a skin care treatment cannot be relied on to effectively and efficiently deliver better tone, more firmness, fewer fine lines and fewer breakouts, you will lose this client and most of her niche with her. Instead of a costly facial treatment that does nothing but pamper, she will instead schedule a massage in order to lower stress levels and reconnect with her body, then see her local medical spa or dermatologist for a facial treatment, such as microdermabrasion, that will deliver visible improvement,

not just an amorphous, dreamy “I enjoy being a girl!” feeling.

That also goes for the most aggressively marketed-to segment of the skin care industry today—men. Oh sure, Kyan Douglas, the grooming guru of Bravo’s popular reality show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* says, “Sometimes a fella just wants to feel pretty,” but they, too, are after results. This is why they are the most appreciative recipients of skilled extractions, which are about as concrete as you can get in skin care.

Americans often feel guilt about spending money on things that are regarded as being a little frivolous.

Other services that can be marketed to men persuasively are smoothing manicures that prevent and treat rough cuticles, and pedicures that keep toenails from growing into curving talons. Both services can be positioned and marketed as sex appeal enhancements.

Another treatment that makes sense to guys is beard-area care. Many men experience chronic irritation along the jaw line and throat due to a combination of alkaline shaving foams, abrasion, alcohol-based aftershave products and sun exposure. Education and soothing treatments in this area allow for a closer, painless shave.

SELF-CARE, NOT SELF-INDULGENCE

Perhaps it’s America’s Puritan roots, or simply the current grim global forecast, but the bling-bling approach really only goes so far. Americans often feel guilt about spending money on things that are regarded as being a little frivolous. Therefore, make sure you communicate that what you do is more about health, work, improvement, common-sense prevention and problem solving, and less about feeling decadent. It’s not instinctive for those in this utilitarian culture to feel entitled to enjoy luxury on a regular basis. Americans prefer to feel that they are investing in something productive, which will help them compete and perform better. The key is identifying what this investment consists of to your niche clientele and providing it to them so they never will dream of getting it elsewhere. Otherwise, they will. ■

