

FROM THE AUTHORS OF
The Practitioner's Journey



The
GIFT

7 Practice Success Ideas for Students and Educators

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“We should give as we would receive, cheerfully, quickly, and without hesitation; for there is no grace in a benefit that sticks to the fingers.”
-Seneca

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INTRODUCTION

*F*irst things first: *This is short.*

It's a safe bet that you have enough to read, enough to digest, enough to learn. So we'll keep this brief.

This ebook is only a few pages long—shorter than the introduction to many textbooks. And there aren't many words on those pages. And we used some big fonts, too.

Which is all to say: *don't be scared off.* This is a brief commitment.

Yes, this is about the business of being in practice. And we know you probably don't care about that right now. We know you just want to put it off until it's time to start your practice. That's normal. We've been there.

But just give us a few pages. You can even skim if you want—there's no homework, no final exam. **Just seven ideas that we think can make a difference.**

After all, if a few minutes right now can change the course of your future practice, isn't that time well spent?

ONE

The Gift You Never Wanted

Let's be honest up front. You got screwed a bit when you signed up to be a practitioner.

It turns out that while you thought you were signing on to become a health care professional, it turned out you were being signed up for another job, too: *entrepreneur*.

Most of the CAM and integrative health professions don't offer much in the way of traditional jobs and corporate ladders, so when you signed on to be a practitioner, you also made a commitment to own and run a business.

It's quite likely that no one told you this.

Or if they did, you weren't really listening.

But that's okay. Because here's the good news: you got a two-for-one deal. You get to be a practitioner *and* a business owner. *It's a gift.*

Of course, right now it might not *seem* like this two-for-one deal is a gift. But that's the way that some gifts come. Going to school—whether it's for acupuncture, chiropractic, massage, naturopathy or any one of a myriad of other possibilities—is a bit like getting a puppy. Or having a baby. It's fun and exciting, but there are a few strings attached that they don't tell you about.

In the end, though, you fall in love and it turns out that you wouldn't have it any other way.

But what does it all mean right now? Just that *some gifts take time to unwrap and truly appreciate.*

You may not always see the benefit of the gift right away. But it's there. So for now, be gracious: *accept the gift.* You don't have to unwrap it. Just accept it by taking this one tiny germ of an idea and pushing it into the fertile ground of your amazing brain:

You're going to be in business.

Just like gifts can take awhile to unwrap, some seeds don't germinate quickly. But that's okay. Just accept it for now. It's enough.

TWO
The Desert

I **magine for a moment** that you're standing in the middle of an arid desert. You have your stethoscope. Or your massage table. Or maybe some supplements or acupuncture needles.

Whatever it is you really need to do your job, it's there. *The problem is that there's no one else.*

You're standing alone in the middle of nowhere.

Practice is like that desert at first. Because while what you learn in school may give you the tools you need to *help* people, it doesn't *deliver* the people. **It's what you learn in business that helps you do that.**

Until you accept and unwrap the gift of being in business, the desert of practice is a pretty lonely place. You might have the tools, but without the clients, you've got no reason to use them.

That seed you planted—that idea that you're going to be in business—doesn't just flower in your bank account. It doesn't just bear financial fruit. It's also the best tool in your arsenal for helping people. *Because it's how you find them in the first place.*

It's easy to think that it's your tools and techniques that help people—your needles and adjustments and herbs and assessments and advice. And that's certainly true. Those things do help. But it's not just about your modality or your profession. Your *practice*—this business thing that you inadvertently got mixed up in—can be the biggest tool you have for helping.

Being in business is how you reach people. Which means it's also the first step in helping. It lets you find people, help them and get paid. And that lets you find and help even more.

The gift of being in business is an important one. It might be the best present you ever get as a practitioner because it brings life to the desert. It makes sure you're not alone.

Not convinced? That's okay. For now, just be gracious—accept the gift. You can unwrap it later.

THREE
The Start Line

*H*ere's another secret that no one is telling you: *You're already in practice.*

Yes you're a student. No, you don't have a degree, or a diploma, or a license, or a certificate, or whatever it is your school gives you.

That doesn't matter. You're already in practice. *The start line is behind you.*

Every day that you preceptor with another professional, or try a technique on your fellow students, you're in practice.

Each time you take part in practical clinical work at your school, or use your friends and family as guinea pigs for the latest thing you learned, you're in practice.

When you talk about what you do at a party, or even apply it to your own health, *you're in practice.*

In those moments, you're doing the same things you're going to do in "real" practice. You're educating people. You're learning how to manage clients. You're using your tools and techniques.

You're already doing the things you're going to do in practice. So why not think of this time right now—these months and years in schools—as your first practice?

Instead of thinking of your work at school—to see X clients in order to graduate, to use Y techniques or to preceptor with Z other clinicians to get your diploma—as educational obligations, why not think of them as growing your first practice?

You're growing your first practice *right now.* Just because you're not being paid, or you're doing it in San Diego but you're going to move back to New York, doesn't mean it's not your first practice.

It is.

The next person that comes into your teaching clinic isn't another number to help you graduate. She's a client in your first practice. Why not treat her that way?

FOUR

The Baby & The Bathwater

*B*e honest: you probably hate the business class at your school.

You're likely skipping it if you can get away with it. And if you do have to go, you're grumbling about it.

It doesn't mean your instructor isn't a great person, or that what she's teaching isn't wonderful. The reason you "hate" it is that *you don't think it matters right now*.

Sure, you may think the idea of creating a business plan two years before you start practice is dumb. And that learning how to use accounting software while you're still trying to figure out human anatomy is not the best use of your time.

And, really: *we agree*. Those things have value, but maybe they're not the most important things *right now*.

But don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.

If you can buy into the idea that you're already in practice—even if you aren't being paid yet—then the business or practice management class that's offered at your school suddenly becomes a lot more relevant.

First of all, whoever's teaching you probably knows a thing or two. You might disagree, *but don't judge what they know by what they've chosen to teach*. They've got constraints that you don't—accreditation and curriculum responsibilities that make teaching a challenging job. So cut them a bit of slack.

Second, that person is a captive resource at your disposal. That might not seem like much, but trust us: when you get out in practice, you'll wish for the days when you had a person with business experience whose job it was to answer your questions. Go ahead and use the resource. Ask them stuff. Forget about what they're teaching and ask them the questions you have about practice. *Use them while you have the chance*.

And if you don't like the class, you can change it. You can change it by showing up and talking about what you want more of, and what you want less of. In our experience, that means fewer lectures about accounting, and more Q&A sessions with people who are finding success in practice right now. It means less time preparing a business plan you'll never use, and more time taking a road trip to visit a clinic that's *actually done it*.

Yes, you might not like your practice management class. But you can make it relevant, and you can use it to your advantage. Forget about the curriculum or the syllabus. Or the assignments and exams. It's not about what they're teaching. It's about what you can *learn*. They're not the same.

Don't phone it in. You might regret it later.

FIVE

Bicycles & Breakfast

*L*et's pretend you actually agree with everything so far. That being in business is a good thing. That it's important. And that it's important now.

Even if you can digest that, there's still a good chance that there's something standing in your way. And it's probably this:

You don't think you're cut out for this business stuff.

You might say things like, "I'm no good at business," or "I'm terrible with money," or "I'm too shy to promote myself." Or maybe you say something like, "I wish I could just do massage / acupuncture / naturopathy / chiropractic / whatever and not deal with this business stuff."

That's okay. It's normal to feel that way. And guess what—it's okay to think that way, too.

It's just not okay to think that way forever.

Anyone can learn to run a business. *Anyone.* To market a practice, to understand money, to manage people—those things are just skills. It's like riding a bike or making breakfast. You don't have to be special. *You just have to learn.*

In fact, most successful practitioners we've met—and we've met a lot of them—aren't special. They're no different from you. But for some reason we create special status around that and call them blessed, lucky, brilliant or unique.

They're not. But they do share one thing in common: they've all learned to get good at using the gift of business. And guess what? Some of the most successful ones we know started getting good at it in school.

But they're not special. They just get up every day, learn a bit, and do a few of the things that move them closer to where they want to be. Then they also get up the next day and do the same thing. And the next.

Really—how special is that? Not very. It might be *uncommon*, but it's not special. You can do that.

Before you started school, would you have said to yourself, "I'm a lousy chiropractor"? Of course not. You knew that you hadn't started learning to be one yet. You weren't a lousy chiropractor then, you were a *non-chiropractor*. Those are two different things. The same applies to business.

Why call yourself lousy at business when you haven't started learning it yet? You're not a bad businessperson. You're just a non-businessperson. Not the same.

The good part is that the gap is easy to close. Just do what you're doing to become a practitioner: *learn*. You've got this great gift unwrapped—you just need to figure out how to use the damn thing.

SIX
Spill Some Milk

*S*o learning seems like something you can do, right? How hard can it be?

There's a small catch. To learn how to use this business gift, you're going to have to do something they don't encourage in school: *you're going to have to fail a few times.*

Really. Just like you learn to walk by falling down, you learn business by careening about and bouncing off a few walls, too. It's not a skill that we're taught. We're told not to cry over spilled milk—no one says, “*Hey, kid. Spill some milk. It's good for you.*”

Instead, you've been well trained to avoid failure. And that's especially true in health care. A big part of becoming a health care professional, in fact, is learning *not to screw up.*

It's understandable, though. After all, you're entrusted with someone's care. With their trust. At times, with their secrets, and above all, with the most valuable thing they have: *their health.*

So it's kind of a big deal. Depending on your profession, you may be spending a lot of your time learning to not hurt people. To not get sued. Learning things like ethics and jurisprudence. You may have a regulatory body or college dedicated to the whole idea. You might have to do continuing education just to *prove* that you're not going to screw up.

That's all fine, because this is health care. It's a big deal. The stakes are high.

The stakes in growing your practice, however, are often pretty low. And that means that not only is it okay to screw up, but it's *encouraged.*

Why? Because that's how you learn in business. By doing.

Right now you may be learning far more from reading and studying than from *doing.* When you start your practice, though, you'll have to start working without a net. You'll have reverse the process, and begin to learn by doing.

How will you attract patients? What marketing should you use? What office hours should you choose?

Who knows? The answers are a little different for everyone. You just find out what works for you by *doing.*

For this kind of learning to work, there are a certain number of mistakes you need to make to move ahead. If you aren't failing, then to some extent you're not going anywhere. So why not get on with them? Spill some milk. It's good for you.

Fear of making a mistake in practice *might* make you a more thorough practitioner. Maybe.

Fear of making a mistake in business will close your doors. *It will take away the gift.* And that means no more helping.

SEVEN

Begin

*F*irst, a quick review:

1. **You're in business**—or, you will be. For most practitioners, that's the reality of a life in alternative, holistic, or integrative care. There aren't many "jobs" out there.
2. That's not such a bad thing, because **business is how you reach people**. All the tools and training in the world are irrelevant when you have no one to help.
3. Not only is business important, but **business is important right now**. Even though you feel like a student, you're already practicing. The sooner you can embrace the idea of being in business, the better.
4. And that means **the business class at your school is relevant** now, too. Use it while you can.
5. **Don't be fooled into thinking you're not cut out for business**. That's like saying you're not cut out for riding a bicycle or making breakfast—they're just skills, and so is business. No specialness required.
6. Still, **you're going to have to make some mistakes**. The good thing is that mistakes are how you learn, and now is a great time to make them. The stakes are low.

That's our manifesto. Our declaration that this side of your career in health care is important. That business matters—to you *and* to your clients. *That it's a gift in disguise.*

But there's one more step. It's that step that makes the difference. The same step that differentiates successful practitioners from those who struggle. That step is *doing something*.

If the six things above ring true to you—at least a little—then it only makes sense to do something about it now.

Now, at this point it may feel like you should nod and smile, and then promptly forget about this until you graduate. Pay a little lip service to the idea...but file it away for now.

That's a trap. Don't step in it.

You really *can* do something now. Lots of things. Easy things.

Better still they *will* make a difference. There are plenty of notable examples of people who've done it:

- *Benjamin Lynch, ND* was still a naturopathic student at Bastyr when he founded HealthE Goods to sell supplements online. In 2010 he appeared in Inc Magazine's top 500 at #323, with sales in the millions.
- *Chris Kresser, LAc* founded his blog *The Healthy Skeptic* while he was studying Chinese medicine at AIMC Berkeley. By the time he graduated and was licensed in 2010, he already had an audience to help him fill his practice in a month.
- *Kristen Bishop* and *Terry Fong* founded the Naturopreneurs while attending Southwest College, to help prepare students for the business side of practice. The group meets every other week, and tours successful practices during school breaks.
- *Keri Marshall, ND* actually found, leased and began paying for her office space *months* before she graduated. She's appeared on ABC and PBS, published several papers and book, consulted for many companies and been an expert witness. And she runs a successful practice, too.
- *Thomas Dandrea, DC* borrowed thousands of dollars from his own chiropractor during school so he could take extra weekend courses and be fully prepared to hit the ground running when he graduated. He's never looked back.

Those are just a few examples. There are plenty more, but they all share one thing in common: *they started their journey to business success during school*. You can do the same. In just a few minutes a week you can start preparing yourself for creating a successful practice.

Really. You can. At this point, all you really need to do is just *start to taste the flavor of being in business*. That's it. Just start.

Here are a few ideas:

Read some good books.

Not textbooks. Not research papers. Not abstracts. You likely have enough of that stuff. Find something *readable* that doesn't feel like work.

Read Kiyosaki's *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* to learn about money. Read *The Go-Giver* and *Go-Givers Sell More* to discover a side of business and marketing and selling that just might change how you feel about those things. Read *The Diamond Cutter* to understand that spirituality and business might just fit together better than you think.

Subscribe to a couple of good blogs.

Like ours. Really. We don't spam you, and the content is worth your while. Visit www.PractitionersJourney.com and see if we're a fit.

Start Your Own Online Presence.

Start a blog. A Facebook page. Tweet. Create a website, or an email newsletter. You can do it with just a few spare minutes here and there, and no money at all. And when you graduate, you'll be one step closer to where you want to be.

Take a road trip.

Like Kristen and Terry's naturopreneurs, you can learn a *lot* by visiting other practitioners. And not just the ones in *your* profession. Just reach out and ask for a small bit of time, and tell them why. Or go see a guest speaker. Hit a convention, if you can afford it. But get out there. It's worth it.

Keep an Eye Out for Your 'Why'

If nothing else, keep watch for that thing we call *passion*. It's what drives the best, most successful practitioners.

The thing is, though, you can't just *pick* a passion. You don't get to wake up one day and decide. That's like trying to think of a great movie idea or a hit song melody on the spot. It doesn't work that way. Sometimes you have to watch and wait.

Passions are in your peripheral vision. Right there running along beside you. To see them, you have to keep your eyes open and make sure you look around once in a while. They're easy to miss. And they're easily disguised under things like being afraid. Or by other people's opinions.

Those things you study even when you don't have to? That you take extra coursework in? That you never get bored of? They could be a passion.

So keep an eye out. You don't want to miss yours.



The gift of being in business is yours to accept, unwrap, and use. But you can only do it by getting started. Whatever it is you do—read a book, take a trip, start a blog—do something, and do it sooner rather than later. Because when you get into practice, success is going to be all about *doing*.

And now's a good time to warm up to the idea.

Unwrap the gift. It might take you an instant, or it may take years, but accepting it and discovering the business of practice is something that starts now.

Go ahead. Open it up. You won't regret it.



REGIFTING

*T*his is really about one thing: finding a way for “business” to be a comfortable idea. For it to be familiar when it arrives—something you might embrace, even tentatively, when it shows up on the front steps of your fledgling practice.

It’s a good thing, this idea of business. This gift. It has the potential to help you bring more care to more people than you ever could otherwise. And the good news is that you don’t have to do it perfectly.

But you do have to do it.

The better news is you don’t have to do it by yourself. You may well be on your own out there in practice, but you never have to be *alone*. Stay connected, and keep learning. That’s how it works.

If you’re still uncertain about how to get started using this weird and wonderful gift called business, then start here: pass this ebook along to someone. A teacher. A fellow student. A practitioner. Share it on Facebook. Tweet it.

Share the idea, because one day you’re going to be asking your clients to do the same—to share the idea that is *you* and your practice.

So pass it on. You can send this document, or you can direct people to www.PractitionersJourney.com.

Good luck with school, with your practice, and everything else along the way.

-Dan Clements & Tara Gignac, ND