

NEW INNOVATIONS



Innovative Online Counseling Referral Programs (Part 1)

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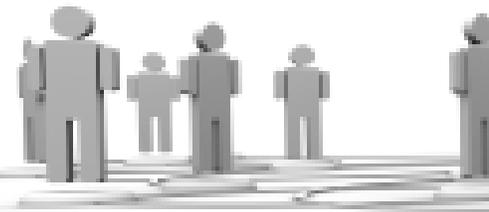
Her eye was first drawn to the beautiful image on the card and the headline that fit her deep desire for relief. Feeling hope and a bit of excitement from the bold declaration on the card, the professionally dressed woman decided that it couldn't hurt to text the number on the card for more information. In this crowded doctor's lobby, no one would know that she was inquiring into mental health services.

CONNECT OFFLINE CLIENTS WITH ONLINE RESOURCES

One of the most common problems faced in starting an online counseling practice is the question of how to market or advertise the practice to acquire clients. An ad, leading to a text-base interaction, is just

one of many innovative ways you can get clients to see you online. Many online counseling marketing programs have some of these same elements. But, more often, they have a link or two missing in the chain of events that get clients to go online. Maybe their marketing is only web based. Those who use websites as their sole referral source can tell you that the referral process often gets stalled there. A website alone will not bring in enough referrals for a full-time practice. Maybe it is time to try something more interactive that meets clients at their point of need. Counselors should use their considerable problem solving skills to help clients adopt online counseling services. Consider again the example.

The response to the woman's text was immediate. She's one of the 68% ([Pew, 2012](#)) of young Americans who have fallen in love with the smart phone. The return text she received provided some options. No, she didn't want to call the number on the screen and talk to someone, not now surrounded by strangers. Yes, she wanted to know about the services, but was drawn to the survey she could take right then on her small screen. After



a few more clicks, she agreed with the results of the screening. She really did need some help.

Her private problem, she knew, was growing. She hadn't really known how to get help. She'd been too embarrassed to discuss it with her friends. However, this survey seemed to be accurate and made getting help pretty easy. She hadn't considered online counseling to this point, but now she was curious and open. Ever since she picked up that ad in the lobby, everything seemed to line up. It was encouraging.

THE COMBINATION IS THE KEY

The combination of several key ingredients makes a program like the one illustrated work: an eye catching "ad" with a bold and encouraging claim (something counselors are often reluctant to make), placement in a high-traffic area where re-enforcement will

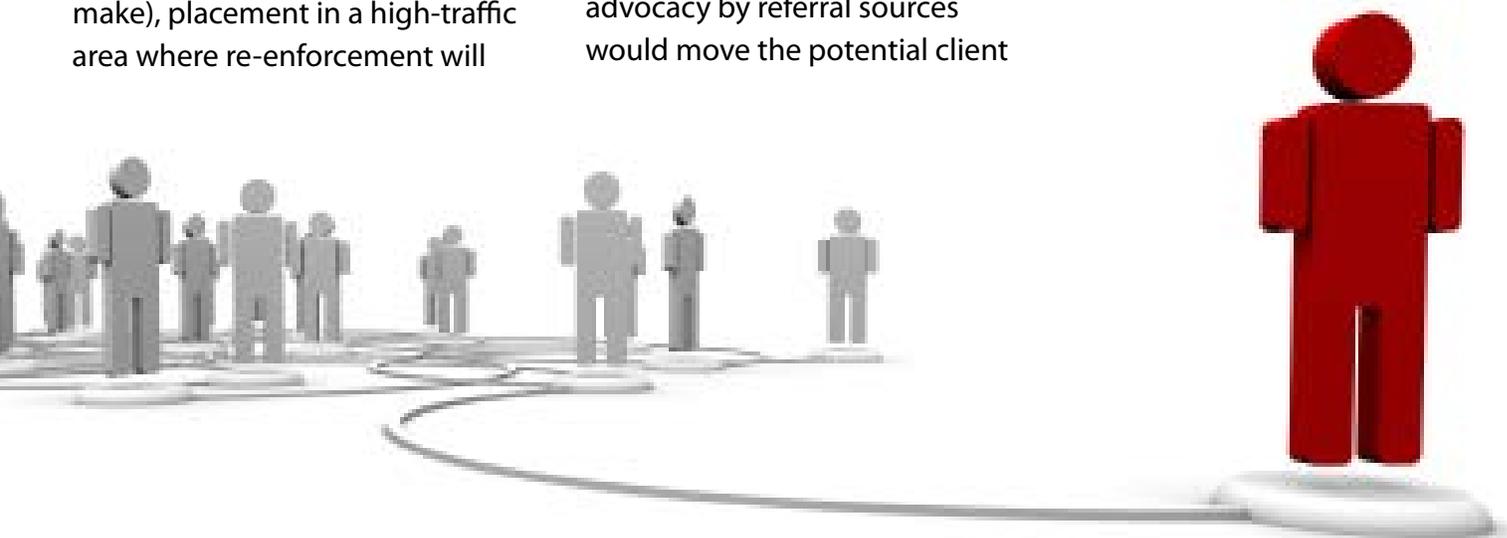
likely take place, ease of client engagement (text messaging), immediate response, a validating survey, etc. Remember to keep the client's point of view in mind. At each step of the client's decision-making process, educate the client, build trust, and provide options leading them to online counseling services.

The ad in the illustration didn't talk about the details of the service. That comes later. The ad gave the woman hope and engaged her in a process that built awareness of the severity of her issues and of the online counseling resources to meet that need. Encouragement, validation and ease of connection were essential ingredients that made the self-referral process work. However, connection and advocacy by referral sources would move the potential client

to schedule and follow through with an online counseling appointment.

INTERFACE WITH REFERRAL SOURCES

As she was moved along from room to room in the doctor's check-in process, she wondered what to tell her doctor about her problem. Looking again at the results of her screening on her smartphone, she found what she was looking for "What to tell your doctor." Well, it doesn't get any more clear than that! Clicking the link, she saw the list of symptoms that fit her to a tee and treatment options and discussion points with her doctor. So, when she saw the doctor, she handed over her phone.



After reviewing the symptom list on her smartphone, her doctor agreed that she needed some professional assistance. They discussed the local and online options and she was a little surprised that the doctor knew about the online counseling center in the ad and had many other patients who had very positive experiences with these services. The idea of receiving help from home was really appealing to her and since her doctor had a high opinion, she decided to give it a try. In the office, the doctor pointed out that with a few clicks she would have the appointment time she needed. With her consent, her doctor even sent the online counselor a note to coordinate care.

A few minutes later, she began feeling rather nervous. She had a lot of questions. What if she couldn't figure out the technology? Will the counseling sessions end up on YouTube or Facebook? The hope was being taken over by fear and doubt. She wasn't sure if she could do this anymore. Sensing her hesitation, the doctor reassured her that this was secure and that the online counseling center was very good at helping clients set up the sessions and would answer all of her questions. The most prestigious counseling, medical, and government agencies support

online counseling. Her doctor reassured her that she was in good hands. Her sessions would begin the next day. Driving home, she glanced at the little ad and marveled at the new way of getting help. She felt hopeful for the first time in a long time.

CREATE A CLIENT ACQUISITION PROCESS

Online counseling has a bigger barrier to entry simply because it is new and not yet the norm in the general population. In order to grow a steady flow of online counseling referrals, online counselors need to create more than an advertising campaign or marketing brochure or website. They need a client adoption process that meets the needs of their target market at each decision point. Your referral flow may start with client education on an issue that leads to your online help. In this case it started with a topic and was reinforced by the relationship with a local doctor who converted the woman to a scheduled client. Clients come to online counseling in many different ways. They typically need several reinforcements before the commit to therapy of any kind. The combination of different marketing efforts will be the key to client adoption online

counseling services.

Obtaining referrals for an online counseling practice will take more than simply posting a website, making a brochure or other common marketing practices. Addressing each potential barrier and decision point in your referral process will help you plug the leaks in your referral process. Consider ways to address the needs of the client at different entry points and how you might lead them down a path to start online services.

REFERENCE

[Smartphones Particularly Popular With Young Adults](#), High Earners. Pew Internet & American Life Project, September 11, 2012, accessed on September 12, 2012.

If you would like to share your innovative idea on gaining clients for online practice, email ideas and comments to jay@behavioralhealthinnovation.com.

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