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Marketing the Sport and Exercise Psychology Consultancy Practice

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Abstract

As sport psychology consultants, we might believe our expertise lies in the practice of sport psychology, not in the business of sport psychology; but this circumstance seems unfortunate because navigating the business and marketing world offers much stability and freedom to a practitioner in private practice. More critically, to be a sustainable service in public consciousness, we need to market our services accessibly and sustainably. The goals of this chapter are threefold. First, I examine how marketing principles apply to a sport and exercise psychology business. Second, I explore the strategies to market practitioners and their services. Finally, I use my private practice as an illustration and model to follow in marketing one's private practice with face-to-face and online services. One overarching goal in this chapter is to remain focused on the principles and practices to bring your practice to the public whilst establishing and maintaining an accessible and engaging writing style. I intend to keep the tone of this chapter conversational to echo the practical challenges marketing one's private practice.

Fully Booked?

Many aspiring sport psychology consultants ask for guidance and advice when setting up their private practice and I am humbled to be asked for support because I feel what I know and do does not differ from what others working within the field also know and do. Perhaps

those who search for support hunger for authenticity, which remains at the core of how I practice. I have worked in sport and exercise psychology for the past 20 years with a purposeful passion to do the greatest good I can do. With this intrinsic desire to help others, my work is a calling. Although this calling means I do not see service delivery as work, I am careful about my boundaries (e.g., practical, psychological, financial) to do what I do well, but not at the expense of family life and friendships.

The first challenge we encounter in private practice is encouraging clients through our doors. Regrettably, no clients mean no practice. Setting up one's private practice is a challenging undertaking for any sport psychology consultant, and I appreciate we cover that topic elsewhere in this book (see Chapter 10 for the Mental Health of the Consultant). The goal of this chapter is to explore how we bring our services to the notice of the public. In today's digital marketing world, we use social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), paid ads (e.g., Google ads) and search engine optimisation (i.e., SEO) to bring our services to those searching for them in a global market. These digital platforms encourage people to click on advertisements that might comprise a suggested service or benefit; however, most people searching for the services of a sport psychology consultant wish to know more about the person offering these services. Sport psychology consultants meet this demand by listing their services in an online directory or establishing a professional website to share information about their training and qualifications alongside their services and charges for these services. Social media platforms and websites allow us to offer services to the broad community of services users, so we are continually learning about their needs, wants and preferences in the services we offer.

Social media outlets (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) are free to join and much of your marketing (e.g., posting offers of services) can exist on these sites without paying for your advertisement to be shared with a selected audience (e.g., people in London). You can,

however, set up paid advertising on these platforms (e.g., £10 per day) to gain followers, develop brand awareness or increase visitors to your website, for instance. Once we have set up our digital marketing system, we can get started building our professional private practice. But we need to know who's buying what we're selling. And we need to know how we fit among other professionals offering psychological services to the public so our services match and exceed the current standard.

Building Trust and Credibility

A core principle of our work as sport psychology consultants is to build trust and credibility with clients for effective outcomes for them. As a private practice, we also build trust and credibility through the information we offer to the public, especially the details on our website.

Write to the Top

Much of the information that I share in this chapter weaves across your website, listing on directories and social media platforms. The one common denominator is writing because writing represents your content generation, and you require this content for your platforms. Learning to write for a consuming public combines two interrelated points – enticement and offers – so what you are writing is enticing people to learn about you and what you offer as a practising sport psychology consultant. This point feels contentious to some people because they feel they are trying to maintain a balance between marketing copy and sound guidance and advice for a consuming public. Copywriters will write content aimed toward the best public relations and with an intent for enticing the consumer, but it is possible to write

content for your website and social media platforms and other media outlets that remain simple, authoritative and meaningful.

The first pitfall most people fall into is that they are eager to start their business and online presence, which is heartening; however, we can easily lose sight of the many commitments to maintaining a presence online that is coherent and up-to-date. My recommendation from the outset is to set aside 90 minutes per week for your commitments to your website and online presence. During this time, you might write some blog content and create content to roll out over the next week on Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest or Instagram. For example, you might write a blog about choking in sport or adherence to exercise. Writing the content is step one and step two is sharing your content. Step two requires much work because we need to share content far and wide to reach an audience interested in what we offer as a profession and what you offer as a professional.

We can give sport psychology to the people with honesty, openness and trust. We can communicate these values and more through our writing, so it's sensible to keep the reader in mind and the type of article or blog that is accessible, understandable and a practical way forward for the reader. I encourage creativity here to whet the reader's appetite through titles, headings, subheadings and images. Some integrated website systems (e.g., Wix) allow you to write a blog and all the SEO data attached, such as URLs, meta tags, descriptions and related articles. You can also add buttons and links to contents you might wish a customer to purchase. For example, you might write a blog about learning to relax in stressful environments. At the end of the blog, you can add a button to link to the online course you created (e.g., learning to relax) which might be off-site (i.e., on another website like [teachable.com](https://www.teachable.com)). In this marketing funnel, you are bringing your customers from awareness at the top of the funnel to purchase at the bottom of the funnel. The top of the funnel represents marketing, while the bottom of the funnel represents sales. Once you gain the awareness and

interest of a customer, the marketing funnel works towards consideration towards a decision about an intent to purchase. Off-site marketing (i.e., marketing to bring people to your website) might happen through videos on YouTube or contributions to podcasts. For instance, you might offer the public an education on topics in sport and exercise psychology with links to your website and services. Similarly, podcasts offer the public a popular and engaging way to know you, your services and how you might help them.

Although most sport psychology consultants will be less aware of the sales and marketing processes, web design companies now present integrated packages that include booking services, booking calendars, blogs, pricing plans and subscriptions. Behind these usual tools lie your inbox, customer relationship management systems, marketing and SEO, analytics and finance systems for raising invoices, sending pricing quotes and payment systems. The typical cost of this website system (e.g., Wix) is about £25 per month for all these business services. Your private practice and the whole management of your private practice are within your hands, but we must factor this time into your working week because it is how you run your business.

A commitment to writing is a central principle for our private practice, to which we tie a few more commitments; though you have a choice about how you wish to proceed. The extra commitments I mention here are learning about search engine optimisation, pay-per-click (PPC) advertising and ads on social media sites (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest). There is a choice because you can do so much excellent marketing and sales work without spending much money if you have access to a computer and the web; however, these activities will cost you time. We could subcontract such work to a company specialising in these activities (e.g., blogs, advertising) and companies vary in the management fees to look after your SEO, PPC advertising, social media adverts and so on. When these systems work well, you find

yourself on the first page of searches (e.g., Google, Bing) and a series of display advertisements that draw people to your website offerings.

Sport and exercise psychology is a small market globally. In the United Kingdom (UK), for example, there are about 300 registered Sport and Exercise Psychologists with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). Some of these registered professionals will not be practising; however, the profession is growing in the UK. Average searches in the Google search platform in the UK for the term 'Sport Psychologist' remain around 3k per month at the time of writing. In comparison, personal trainers will have searches on Google of around 22k per month. In short, the demand for Sport Psychologists is about 15% of the personal trainer market. These figures mean some people are searching for the services of a sport psychology consultant, though these numbers are low, they do present exciting possibilities for growth.

Pricing

Though pricing is a sensitive subject in many professions, I include pricing early in the chapter because it influences so much of the work we do in private practice. Sport psychology consultants are free to charge whatever fees they deem right for their services, with typical charges in 2010 ranging from £80 to £200 per hour from a BPS survey. My rule of thumb is that each hour of professional practice, for instance, 1 hour (charged at £100) per day per working week across 50 weeks of the year, would return £25k of income. Every £25k represents 250 hours (50 minute hours) across the calendar year. This example is how I have worked in my private practice for many years with 50% of my work offered pro bono publico (i.e., for the public good). On average, I see clients for about 10 hours, so every 250 hours represents about 25 clients. Clients book my services online and pay for the sessions

beforehand. Owing to COVID-19, I have seen most of my clients online (e.g., using Zoom, Skype, FaceTime) over the past two years and my online sessions have grown to about 70% of my client work. I work privately and confidentially in my home office for my online consultancy.

The focus of my argument here is about time rather than money. I value my time so I wish to spend it well on those commitments I must do and those interests that I choose for my health, well-being and entertainment. I divide my time among family, work, lifestyle and interests, which means I set my time boundaries to meet these choices. I hold my life in academia, within firm boundaries (typically 9–5 pm and I never work evenings or weekends), because though I enjoy lecturing and researching immensely, I have other interests and commitments outside academia. Within academia, I write 500 words per working day, which usually takes me about 90 minutes, including reading research articles to generate this content. Though 500 words are relatively few, it amounts to about 125k words per calendar year, which one can divide into a book, a book chapter and four peer-reviewed publications.

For my work purposes, I enjoy scholarly work, especially reading and writing (e.g., academic papers, book chapters, books) and I enjoy working with athletes, coaches and teams. Some words form weekly blogs with a blog content between 600 and 800 words targeting keywords for my search engine optimisation generating traffic for my website. I shall elaborate on SEO later in this chapter.

Charging for Services

There are several ways to charge for your services. We are most familiar with time for money in which we exchange an amount of time (e.g., 1 hour) for a set fee (e.g., £100).

Occasionally, our exchange of time for money is open-ended in which an organisation pays

for your services for their staff over a year and you bill them monthly for the hours, for example. Some organisations and professional clubs choose this payment structure to support their staff over a calendar year. Some clients pay a retainer or recurring fee which they pay you for your services monthly. A client might pay a retainer fee for your services to guarantee access and availability to you over a year. In golf, for example, some management companies will pay a retainer fee to cover expenses and a modest payment, but most of the earning potential depends on the golfer's earnings throughout the season. This back-end payment might be 3% of the total earnings in that season. For example, a golfer finishes the season with earnings of £1 million. You would receive your 3% (i.e., £30,000) at end of the season. Sliding scales or flexible pricing is common with many organisations because they are guaranteeing hours of work per week across the year. Sometimes, I sell products and services as bundles at a reduced rate. In these bundles, the purchaser might receive one-to-one training and online training (through [teachable.com](https://www.teachable.com)). Getting into some markets can challenge us so newcomers might use loss-leader pricing. Loss-leader pricing happens when we price a product lower than its production cost to attract customers to other, more expensive products. Though we often see loss-leader pricing on products in a supermarket, for example, it can be helpful for services too. You could offer one course free (e.g., building self-esteem) even though it cost you time and expertise to prepare the course offering. When customers can sample your course, they are more likely to trust your priced products. We counterbalance the loss made on one service with the gains on other services that are available to the client. You will be familiar with pricing for goods (e.g., grocery shops) that remain low and those that remain high, consistently. Some people fear low prices mean low value; however, it need not be this way and you can build a personal brand that grows over time with services positioned at different price points. At the other end of the pricing scale is

premium or prestige pricing, in which you charge fees higher than is typical for the industry (e.g., £200 per hour).

Together, these pricing systems allow you to think about what might work best for you financially, ethically and morally. These are your choices and your prices and the marketplace will test your pricing strategies, which gives you guidance about which prices work for your goals. I have written about pricing and charging for your services here because it provides you with a marketing budget. Marketing in this digital age means a blend of finance and personal effort. You can do well without spending much money; however, the gains from a minor investment are worthwhile.

Finding Your Audience

Working in sport and exercise settings means that most of our audience associate with sport and exercise for products and services. Some argue that psychological services are a luxury item lying below other necessities like shoes, clothing, apparel, coaching and so on.

Understanding these categories of need means at least two things: first, we need to establish the short- and long-term value of sport psychology services and second, break into existing and new markets. In private practice, you might choose to identify skills and abilities that fit with identified sports. While I have been involved with athletes from over 30 different sports, most of my clients are involved in golf, football, athletics, swimming and gymnastics. Over the past 20 years, 50% of my clients have been child- and adolescent athletes. For this reason, I tailor my services to the needs of this client group and their parents or guardians. Much of this work has a psychoeducational base, so I have written online learning programmes to meet these psychoeducation needs. I have also written guides and courses for parents of child and adolescent athletes.

Bringing Your Audience to Your Website

If we consider your website in a virtual space like a shop window on the high street, we need to pay particular attention to its layout, accessibility and orientation. We want people who pass by to notice what we are selling and be encouraged to walk into our store. With this picture in mind, you will understand how much a professional store matters to potential customers. We want customers to click on our website and for it to load quickly so that they do not bounce off to another faster-loading site. Once on the webpage, we need detail for the customer that tell them about you and what you offer with opportunities to read more or buy now. For example, you might tell them about you and the services you offer and how to purchase these services with the least friction possible. The personal nature of our service delivery as sport psychology consultants means we might wish for our potential customers to see professional pictures at different locations (e.g., office, athletics track, golf course). You can organise your content all on one page or on different pages. There are two chief considerations here: ease of use for the customer and search engine optimisation. Typically, we are using the URLs on each page for the search engine to find content that matches the content of the search and provide the best answer to the search. To optimise your page, you need accurate URLs that the search engine crawls to offer websites to the searcher (e.g., 'sport psychologist near me'). Many of the website providers (e.g., Wix) bring these requirements together for you to manage on your own. Most crawls by a search engine should provide the best responses to the searches from the searcher. For this reason, you need to optimise each page on your website by including relevant and authoritative content for the end user.

One mistake many people make is that they want their website to look good; however, while the site might look professional, many of them are missing the required details to be found by a search engine and to rank high in a search engine's results. Once you have written suitable content for your website targeting keywords for search engines to find you (e.g., 'sport psychologist near me'), you will also need to write blogs that reflect an active and vibrant website with helpful advice and guidance for people searching the net. Blogs are a wonderful opportunity for you to tell a worldwide audience about you and the work you do. You can also optimise blogs for search engines with the tags for the image(s) on the blog, the related URLs to other blogs on the website or links to purchase products and services. Through blogs, customers get to know you and establish a relationship with you. Where possible, you might create video introductions to you and your services that help to personalise and reduce the barriers to working with you. All websites offer links to prominent social media outlets (e.g., Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter) which means those who land on your website can follow you on these social media outlets and form a social connection and a widening social community. Likewise, those who land on your Twitter account or Facebook page can be redirected to your website. It will not have passed your attention that we offer free advertising to all these social media platforms on our websites; however, their reach and social following makes it worthwhile for us.

Memberships

Some websites offer the possibility of forming memberships for those who wish to pay a subscription for your services over a year, for example. Within these memberships, a member might receive personal e-mail support, exclusive content and promotions which are unavailable to non-members. Several companies work to develop large e-mail groups. One

way to achieve this large group of e-mail contacts is to offer a free e-book for an e-mail address. Over time, you might establish an e-mail list of 10,000 people and an Instagram following of 40,000 followers. This following represents a section of the market who value what you offer. Later, you might wish to write a book or create an online learning programme. Instead of paying for marketing for your course or book, you might offer a deal to your followers for their support to access your book or online course for a reduced fee. For instance, you might create an online learning programme and offer it to your 40,000 followers on Instagram and your 10,000 e-mail list for a reduced fee of £35 reduced from £75. If 2% of this 50,000-strong following purchased your offering, you would generate £35,000 for your efforts. Maybe you make one offering per year to your following.

Memberships are common in many fields (e.g., coaching, physical fitness) and while some are free, some have minimum pricing while others charge a premium for access to content and support. Running membership programmes requires much commitment because the membership usually depends upon receiving fresh content each month for the benefit of the member. Running memberships, just like websites and social media accounts, means a time commitment; however, it's possible to share content on several platforms at once or schedule posts. Between search engines (e.g., Google, Bing), social media (e.g., Twitter and Instagram) and local marketing (e.g., listing in directories), you can create a comprehensive and coordinated presence for your digital marketing efforts. Today, each search engine can generate reports from Google, for example, about our website's performance and the contribution of all the social media accounts too. In Google Search Console, for instance, you can review your reports regarding performance, URL inspection, coverage, sitemaps, page experience and internal and external links on your website. You might find that some pages are generating all your traffic while others are not or people who find your website do not stay on your website for long because it is challenging to navigate, or it doesn't offer the

information the searcher is seeking. These reports help us tailor our work to best need the needs of our target audience.

Paying for Promotion There are several ways to promote your services digitally. One of these common ways is PPC advertising, in which you pay a price for each click that brings a customer to your website. The success of PPC depends upon the competition for the advertising space. In Google, for instance, you might wish to appear in the ads above the organic listings. To be listed here on the first or second pages on Google, you need to pay a competitive price. The competition determines this price as they compete to advertise in this space. Setting up a PPC campaign is relatively straightforward, however, to generate a return on your ad spend often requires much learning or help from a dedicated PPC company. If you do not set up your adverts for PPC correctly, you might well be spending your money on broad searches that rarely generate the traffic you need for your site and services. Several commercial companies offer excellent management services to manage your PPC campaign for you; however, average management fees are about £350 per campaign per month (though you will find cheaper offerings). A good campaign for high-priority keywords related to the profession of sport psychology might range from £0.30 to £1.99 per click, but a good PPC campaign will maximise the return on your investment in AdWords. It's likely that you might spend £500–£750 per month running a PPC campaign that is managed by an external company (including their management fee). Of course, these prices vary and searching for value for your money is a worthwhile investment. Some of the PPC adverts also use display ads in various search engines and social media outlets in which your ad might appear for much less than you pay at the top of the page of Google. These display ads might be a few pence per click and offer much value in promoting your brand or service.

Many digital advertising companies also offer SEO for websites and PPC. The advice given is that PPC and SEO work well together because PPC brings clients to your website, but if the site does not work well for the end user, it might need an overhaul. The goal of SEO is to get your site ranking as high as possible on the first page of a search engine. Simply, if you type 'Sport Psychologist' into your Google search engine now, whom do you see? Who is on the paid ads at the top and bottom of the page and who is in the organic listings on the page between the paid ads? You might only be interested in offering services to those in your local area (e.g., York), so you can specify your local area. In short, the websites you see here are those with whom you will compete for the best listing in a search engine.

Is SEO Worth the Money?

The simple answer to this question is yes because if you have goods and services to trade, you will need to be found online and you will need to be listed at least on the first page of a search engine in your local area if you are targeting a local market. One of the most common queries I receive from trainees and those recently qualified as Sport and Exercise Psychologists is that I have so few clients. When I ask which directories they have listed in and where they are advertising, most show surprise because it had not occurred to them about how people will find them and avail of their services. Or if they have a website, they have not optimised the site for the search engines to find them quickly and easily. Having a website build for you is a positive first step; however, until it is optimised for search engines and listed on local and national directories, it cannot serve you.

You might wish to work on your own SEO following several helpful books or you might wish for a specialist SEO company to do the work for you. Because sport psychology and the services a Sport Psychologist offers are niche, you can make inroads quickly into this market.

Some SEO packages will optimise your site for the local area and a company might manage that process for £150 per month to target three keywords. Adding up our costs as we go, we might spend £750 per month between SEO and PPC advertising, for instance, with specialist companies running our campaigns for us. You might feel that organic listings on search engines are enough so you can cut your costs dramatically and still feel you are moving forward with your private practice. After all, clicks on organic listings from SEO work do not cost us any money.

Directories

Listing on directories is a sensible move for several reasons. First, directories work to place themselves prominently on search engines so that people can find those listed quickly, easily and with trust. Second, directories are an inexpensive (typically £15 per month) advertising option if you cannot afford a website and other requirements (e.g., SEO, PPC). Third, most directories offer all the details to a prospective customer and details about you, your charges, contact, blogs, videos and more. Fourth, directories offer prospective customers a chance to read reviews about you and your services, which increases their trust in you and your services. Fifth, directories often offer access to goods and services to help your business to grow by optimising your profile or providing education and training at a reduced price or for free because you have invested in advertising space in the directory. Sixth, directories spend their time working on digital marketing so that you do not have to. Maybe over one year, you benefit from tens of thousands of pounds of advertising for just £200 per year. Finally, some directories offer limits to who can list in their directory like only those with insurance and qualifications from a reputable body (e.g., HCPC). These limits fill those who list in the directory and those who search the directory with confidence and trust in the services being

offered and the homogeneity of the community. One helpful directory with a worldwide presence is Sporting Bounce. My colleague, Professor Marc Jones and I set up this company to help aspiring practitioners to be found online for their services.¹

Getting Started

Getting started as a sport psychology consultant is challenging for the reasons listed above; however, there are tremendous opportunities as well. Practitioners wishing to establish and grow a private practice must invest in their practice, especially online presence. This investment is often financial and temporal, which means we might need to spend money and our time to grow and sustain our business. We might decide that we will invest 15% of our income into our website hosting and digital marketing. If we were to generate £50k, then £7,500 would be our investment at £625 per month. To generate £50k income, we would need 2 client hours per day across the working week from Monday to Friday for 50 weeks of the year. It is possible to generate this income; however, it depends heavily on advertising (paid and unpaid). Working 2 hours per day seems like a welcome exchange of time for money; however, you might need to invest another hour to create content for blogs and social media accounts. Depending on your choices, you might also wish to pay an external company to write 4,000 words of content each month for a fee (e.g., £300/month) which means you spend 20% of your income of all such digital marketing without you having to do any work other than supporting your clients in service delivery. I addressed this option for practitioners because external companies cater to their digital marketing needs and they focus on the work for which they studied and trained for over several years. In short, the choices are yours based on your interests and inclinations.

Conclusion

In summary, I have painted a picture of the work you need to do to market your private practice. I have written about a digital presence using a website and all the social media outlets that link with it to offer your services to a local, national, or worldwide audience. You can do all the work on SEO, PPC, blogs and content generation for the social media, which means you can keep your costs low. You could also subcontract these tasks to a company who manages the campaigns and content for you while you concentrate on doing sport psychology consultancy. I have found immense benefits from learning about digital marketing but also, I have benefitted immensely from my other companies by subcontracting these services. Their reports each month help me understand our next steps for the month ahead.

My three top tips for those setting up a marketing strategy for their private practice are as follows:

- i. Set aside time each week to write blogs for your website and social media outlets to gather an online following and inform them about you and your services. This service will cost you time and expertise.
- ii. Choosing a good website platform (e.g., Wix) means you have all you need to integrate your website with all leading social media outlets, and you can track your progress by tracking who visits your website and following their guidance to grow your online audience.
- iii. Choose whether you want to spend your money on professional service providers (e.g., SEO, PPC advertising, blog writing) and focus on delivering sport psychology services or whether you wish to take on the whole process yourself.

This decision is critical because you will need to invest in your passion and that might just be doing sport psychology rather than being a marketing consultant.

¹ You can learn more about the company and their offerings at www.sportingbounce.com.