

Demystifying social media



If you've yet to take your first step into the world of social media, **Sue Christy** and **John Bennett** help to get you started

Over recent years therapists in private practice have relied heavily on their websites as the main way to market their practices online. But over the past year, that's all changed. If you are still relying on your website to do your marketing for you, you've probably been pretty discouraged lately. The reason is the growth in social media. Why?

Social media is just that – social. It widens your reach to potential clients and/or referral sources beyond that of your directory listings, website, and any other more static marketing activity. It's fast, fresh and free. Little wonder that it's changing online life as we knew it. As the social media landscape continues to evolve – with new innovations popping up regularly – this constant state of change can be intimidating. However, this doesn't necessarily mean you have to be up on all the latest social media trends and tools. The big three social networking sites – Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter – are likely to be your best first step into the world of social media.

Sue Christy explains: 'Many of my own clients have never searched for a counsellor directly. They may have seen my profile pop up in their Twitter feed or connected with an article I posted to my Facebook page. They may have been put in touch by a professional contact who knows of me from a LinkedIn group or likes what I have to say on my blog. Recently I received the following email: "Hi Sue, you popped up in my Twitter feed and I wasn't quick enough to click the link. I have been searching for you ever since." We started work together shortly after I received that email; imagine that, someone actively seeking you out through something that they have seen about you that grabbed their attention!'

Facebook is the reigning king of social media for private practitioners, particularly with regards to visibility in your community. For instance, Facebook users have on average 234 friends. That means if you have 50 fans of your page, you are seen by 11,700 Facebook users. Having an active, vibrant Facebook page will demonstrate that you have an active, vibrant practice. What's more, you can share interesting articles, promote workshops, ask questions, comment on others' professional pages (think locally – demonstrating expertise to local business and community groups by posting comments on posts and sharing content is one of the quickest ways to build your Facebook profile). Clients will be able to get a sense of your personality and style way beyond anything a static website has to offer and they will seek you out, rather than just shop around for someone they have not made any connection with.

If you don't already have a Facebook account, here are the seven steps to get you started:

1. Open a Facebook account and then create a Facebook fan page. This is the essential first step in the process. As a counsellor you have to draw a clear line between your

- personal and professional life. A Facebook fan page dedicated to your private practice allows this distinction.
2. Ensure your personal privacy. If you use Facebook to share pictures of your family, social events, or simply to keep in touch with friends, you will want to keep that private from your clients. This is simple to manage by choosing the highest level of privacy settings available through Facebook for your personal profile (you have to have a personal profile in order to create a fan page).
3. Provide stimulating, interesting and engaging content. Facebook users are there to engage and share with one another. It is not a platform for selling.
4. Know your audience. Keep your specific niche in mind, so that your content is not only engaging, but is also in line with your services. For instance, a couple counsellor may post a link to a Relate video, or an article from a magazine about pre-marital counselling.
5. Let your personality shine through. When counsellors ask us to critique their social media, and other online presences, our feedback almost always includes, 'It's too clinical.' Throw away the textbooks and certificates, and remember the essence of all counselling is based on the relationship. Be personable and warm in your tone so that clients get a sense of who you are.
6. Connect all your practice building efforts together. While Facebook and other social media are powerful marketing tools, they shouldn't be the only tools in your toolbox. But you can use Facebook to promote your other efforts, such as posting a link to your blog, sharing a guest post you did elsewhere, uploading pictures of yourself and your counselling room, and providing an opt in link to your newsletter. Likewise, you can use more traditional strategies to promote your Facebook page. Put the URL on your business cards, cross-promote it with other local business owners.
7. Be consistent in your efforts. Frequency counts for a lot, not only with your fans, but also with the algorithm Facebook uses to rank pages. A page that lies dormant gives the impression that your practice is dormant. When your fans don't hear from you regularly, your posts are less likely to appear in their news feeds, meaning they won't even get to see them. Set aside a few minutes each day, or at the very least three times per week, and make this a priority. Not only do you need to be posting new content, but you also need to take the time to respond to the comments you get.

Facebook is an incredible resource, and it's likely to get even more powerful in the next few years. This is a great time to start strengthening your presence online and get ahead of the competition.

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