

massage & bodywork

march/april 2015

Set *Client* Expectations

First Impressions, Communication, the Intake Process, and Opening & Closing the Session

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Where Are We Now?

Massage Wisdom from Art Riggs, Rick Garbowski, Thomas Myers & Tracy Walton

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Online Learning

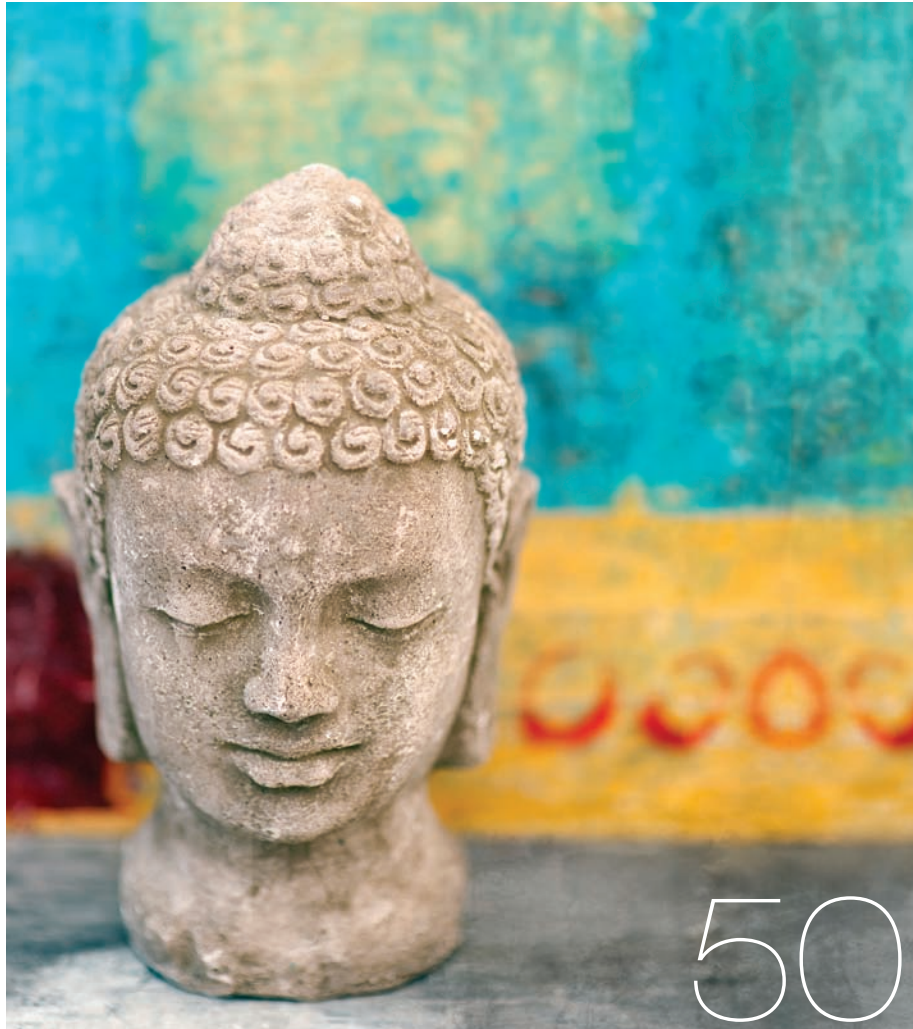
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By Whitney Lowe


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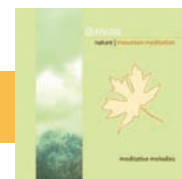
As a stand-alone modality or a complement to others, this subtle, yet effective, technique has much to offer clients and practitioners.

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SET CLIENT EXPECTATIONS

The ideal session doesn't start or end with bodywork. How you set the stage and put the final touches on clients' experiences makes all the difference on whether they return to your table.

By Jeffrey A. Simancek



massage & bodywork

Massage & Bodywork promotes professionalism among practitioners, stimulates healthy dialogue, and expands the knowledge of those in the field to advance their success—while remaining mindful of the breadth of bodywork backgrounds, beliefs, and modalities.

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Alternatively, there are four things he *can* live without: meat, dairy, hair loss, and the Dallas Cowboys winning another Super Bowl.

As he freefalls into his golden years, **Art Riggs** gives thanks for the serendipitous events that led him to a bodywork career. He finds great gratification in the fascinating chess game of structural bodywork and an occasional vacation blended with teaching in faraway, fun places.



When **Jeffrey A. Simancek** isn't teaching or delivering massage, he takes advantage of the fun and adventure life brings. He often volunteers with the Boy Scouts, local businesses, and special events. In his free time, Jeffrey's busy in his garage creating some fascinating and unique project.







Set

Client

Expectations

From Arrival Through Rebooking

By Jeffrey A. Simancek



The *massage* session does not start when you lay your *hands* on your *client* and it does not end with that final *effleurage stroke*. What clients experience in your office *before* and *after* getting on your *table* can determine whether or not *they will return*. This time is what sets an *expectation* in their minds regarding the *quality of care*.

Learning to set expectations is a common aspect of management and leadership development. As therapists, we can use this skill to lead our clients toward regular massage. Most people will rise to the level set for them—once that level has been defined. Managing each client's expectations by properly opening and closing each session reinforces everything you say and do during the session itself.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

You never get a second chance to make a great first impression. That's true everywhere, and it's especially important in the massage therapy profession. Many aspects of massage are based on trust and relationship building, not just technical abilities. How you greet and connect with clients, how you get information and history, and how you inform clients of the options available to them significantly affect the session and the clients' overall experience.

Research shows that within seconds of meeting someone for the first time, judgments and assumptions will be made that lay the foundation for the success and quality of the relationship. Assumptions are made about social and economic status, about whether the person is trustworthy and reliable, and even whether or not they are likeable. Though continued interaction has the ability to influence these first impressions, they will continue to linger in the back of the mind. Welcome your clients into your office with a warm smile, carrying yourself tall and confident. Your physical appearance and body language will say a great deal about the session and what clients can expect. If you appear to be rushed or distracted, clients may wonder if the massage will be the same. Most clients are coming in to escape the daily grind, stress, and discomfort. Approaching them with a broad smile will help clients relax and feel welcomed.

Always greet your clients with a handshake. Your handshake sets a subconscious impression about you, giving the recipient clues about your confidence, security, and strength. Is it the perfect balance of firm and welcoming, without being either bonecrushing or weak? Is it a one-handed or two-

handed shake? Different handshakes create different impressions.

Eye contact and facial expressions often say more than just speaking about the service the client will receive. If you cannot make eye contact, and are instead constantly looking around the room or toward the ground, clients will start to wonder if you are focused on giving them the type of massage they want or if they are going to get a nonspecific, cookie-cutter service. Your facial expression will exhibit the emotions behind your words and thoughts. Are you genuinely interested in clients' health and history, or are you just asking questions because you have to?

These and other nonverbal communications and actions are important to creating an extraordinary service for clients. The way you walk, talk, stand, sit, look, and interact with your clients speaks more strongly, expresses more feelings, and leaves a more lasting impression than what you actually say.

THE INTAKE PROCESS

While the way you greet a client goes a long way toward setting the client's expectations about you as a professional, the intake process solidifies expectations about the massage itself. Many clients come in with preconceived notions about what they want and what they expect. If you do not integrate their expectations into the plan for the session, they may leave unhappy or unsatisfied with the services they received.

Having to answer questions, whether written or verbal, can be overwhelming and stressful, especially for first-time clients. Make clients comfortable and relaxed during this process by carefully asking them about why they've come for bodywork. Sit comfortably and face the client. Make





Key Types of Nonverbal Communication

Eye Contact
Facial Expression
Gestures
Posture
Touch

sure you are in an open body position. Crossing your arms, looking away, or not making eye contact will give the impression you are not listening to them and do not care about what they say.

Help clients understand how the techniques used during the session will address their issues. Clients can relax more during the massage if you have already informed them that, for example, you will start with a lighter touch and work up to firm strokes to help prevent soreness. Ask clients if they would like to end the session with some range-of-motion movements or assisted stretching, and explain why this would benefit their goals. If they are uncomfortable or unsure of the technique, do not use it. You can always demonstrate it or describe it to them after the session so they can consider it for next time.

Whether it is the first conversation or the hundredth one, the verbal and nonverbal exchange that takes place between the client and therapist before each session will impact the work. Clients' needs or goals from the session will vary every time they come in. Their activities of daily living and their stress levels can change what their body needs and affects the approach you should take. The technique and approach you use will need to be adapted to meet those needs.

It only takes a few questions to understand what clients are looking for and what they would like to achieve with their session. Explaining to them what techniques you will use, and why you are using them, sets a clear expectation for the session. Bring clients into their own treatment planning and allow

them input on which techniques will be used to meet their needs and expectations. This lets them take ownership of their session.

CLOSING THE SESSION

What were you taught about ending your massage session? Were you taught to end with effleurage strokes? Speak in a soft tone? Walk your client out? It's likely whatever you were taught ended with getting the client back to the front desk. Unfortunately, not all schools teach, and not all therapists understand, the importance of closing a massage session beyond this point.

Whether you work in the spa industry, run your own practice, or contract with other therapists, knowing how to close the session will have a huge impact on your schedule and your pocketbook. I have witnessed therapists sit in a break room and complain they can't fill their schedule—and I have watched these therapists complete a session by offering their client a bottle of water and a quick goodbye, leaving the front desk team with the responsibility of getting the client rescheduled.

This does not encourage the client to return for future services. There is no education, explanation, expectations, homework, or planning for future needs. Often, clients will leave feeling like they were rushed out of the office, like their health concerns were not a priority, or that they were not the focus of the session.

You don't necessarily need to "sell" massage; massage can sell itself. What you do need to know is how to appropriately close a massage session—especially with new clients—in a way that educates the client about the importance of massage.

CLIENT EXPECTATIONS AND YOUR SALES APPROACH

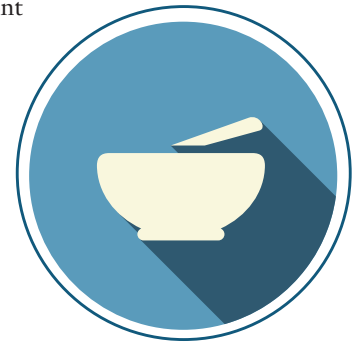
Selling generally doesn't come naturally to the hands-on, service-oriented therapist. It is more natural for the therapist to build a strong, genuine relationship with their clients and make the clients' care a top priority. However, when it comes to both sales and client care, what massage therapists do after the session is just as important as what was done during the session.

Massage therapists are caring people. Many are too passive and are hesitant to push clients to schedule another appointment, believing their skills alone will be enough to get their clients to rebook. Other therapists take a too-forceful approach and overstress the need for multiple sessions, making it sound as if the client's health and well-being are dependent on their therapy. This is a slippery slope to walk. It is important to be confident and direct, but not pushy.

Hard-selling techniques have their place, but it is not usually in the massage room or front office. Pressuring the client to rebook or

join your membership program may annoy her, and can give the impression that money is more important to you than her health. In addition, using threatening phrases like, "Isn't your health worth \$90 a month?" or, "If you do not reschedule, you will end up needing surgery," can place fears in clients' minds and often results in pushing them away from your services. Worse, they may tell their friends not to receive services from you—regardless of how good you are—if you're too pushy.

Soft selling is just as problematic as hard selling. This approach focuses more on relationship building and less on the actual services. Many therapists employ this approach because they believe their services, skills, and techniques speak for themselves, and all the therapist has to do is perform the massage and rely on the front desk staff (or nobody at all) to be the salespeople. After the session, the therapist may walk the client to the front, turn around, and leave. This leaves the client waiting and wondering what is next. Soft-selling techniques can give the impression the therapist does not care about the client.



COMMUNICATE VALUE

An approach somewhere in the middle is where massage therapists need to become comfortable. When closing every session, therapists need to be able to explain what they did during the session, what the client may experience later that day or the next day, and work with the client to develop a plan. This treatment plan should include the client's goals and expectations, needs, frequency of sessions, what type of massage is appropriate, and more. Some clients may need one session a month, some two a month, and some may need weekly sessions. How does the client know what she needs if it is not explained to her? Educating her will allow her to make informed decisions while adding credibility and professionalism to the therapist.

Informational brochures, handouts, blogs, and social media that promote the benefits of massage and your services are important; however, if you do not follow up with that information, clients probably won't seek it out on their own. Educate them about your services and abilities. This involves

them in decisions that affect their health and gives them more control over their own success.

The front desk team, if applicable, is only able to reschedule based on what you do and what you tell the client to do. Therapists need to be able to provide specific recommendations for the types, duration, and frequency of sessions, and support those recommendations with the necessary skills and education. A needs-based approach is a win-win-win approach for the client, therapist, and business.

Assigning homework for the client to complete before the next session is also important. This will vary depending on your education, experience, and scope of practice. It could be stretches, strengthening exercises, or postural awareness. If you do not have the training to assign this type of regimen, the client's homework can be consulting with a specialist you recommend, such as a chiropractor, personal trainer, physical therapist, or other health-care professional. It is important to have a network of professionals to which you can refer your client. Your referral network will also assist in generating additional clients for you and add to your professional credibility.

Every client should leave the office with an increased knowledge of their session, a reminder on the importance of drinking water, homework, and their next appointment scheduled. After your client gets dressed and exits the massage room, you should greet her with a bottle of water and ask how she feels. I personally bring two bottles, one warm and one cold, to give clients an option. While you walk your client to the front, ask her about her body as she moves: "Does your hip feel better?" or "Move the shoulders—how do they feel?" This will help the client bring awareness to her body and to the effects the session had.

DEFINE THE NEXT STEP

Rather than simply asking your client to rebook, set an expectation. You have provided a top-notch service, educated the client with information specific to her needs, and developed a plan for the session; now let her know the next step. There is a big difference between "Would you like to schedule your next appointment?" and "Let's schedule your next appointment two weeks from now so we can continue the pain management and improvements in flexibility."

Keys to Closing the Massage Session

WALK YOUR CLIENT TO THE FRONT DESK

Due to time constraints and back-to-back schedules, many therapists only walk their clients to the lobby, not to the front desk.

YOU ARE THE EXPERT

Clients come to you for help and relaxation. They see you as an expert in the field, so explain to them the benefits of getting regular massage and how often they should schedule for maximum benefits.

ASSIGN HOMEWORK

Tell your clients what they should be doing at home between sessions. Follow up with them before the next session. Did they do the homework? How did it work?

EDUCATE THEM

Client education is crucial to the success of a practice. To be able to educate your clients with current, evidence-based information, you need to be current with your own education. Continuing education seminars are important to you and your business.

PLAN THE SESSIONS

Develop action plans for your clients. How often do they need massage? Once a week, twice a month, monthly? What should those sessions include?

SET THE EXPECTATION

Do not ask your client to rebook; make it an expectation.

If You Have Front Desk Staff

If you work in a spa setting, massage chain, or salon, the postsession conversation can be done in as little as five minutes. Don't leave the client on her own at the front office. Walk her to the front counter and assign or remind her of her homework. Use phrases like, "Remember to stretch throughout the day," or, "Let me know what your chiropractor says for our next session," to remind her she needs to do some follow-up. This is also a good time to show your client some stretches or discuss the next appointment.

Direct her to a specific front desk staff member and say, "Eric will get you scheduled for your next appointment. I would recommend coming back in two weeks." By doing this, it will inform both your client and the front desk staff that there is a follow-up planned, and the front desk employee can take over with the scheduling and/or sale.

If You Work Alone

For those in a private practice, or those with plenty of time between appointments, this closing process is easier. Therapists often plan more time after sessions for these conversations and to allow a little break before their next appointment. Again, it does not take a lot of time to reinforce the benefits of continued sessions. Your hands have already demonstrated the value of massage during the session.

LOOK FORWARD TO REPEAT VISITS

Before you return to your room, be sure to shake your client's hand, make eye contact, thank her, and set an expectation. It is always good to end the conversation with, "Have a great weekend, and I will see you in two weeks." If your client was reluctant to schedule an appointment before leaving, hand her a business card with your schedule written on the back as a reminder.

Generating repeat clientele is important for the success of any business. Success is not in the number of clients you see, but in the number of clients who come back to see you. Creating repeat clientele involves more than just providing top-notch service. It involves educating your clients, involving them in their wellness plans, following up with them, and setting expectations. **m&b**




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