Consumers decide to purchase a particular product or service based in part on their familiarity with the brand and their confidence that it will meet their needs and standards of quality. Like a product brand, a strong professional image for your practice communicates a promise of quality, value and reliability. Such an image sets you apart from competitors by making potential clients and referral sources aware of your unique strengths.

Clients frequently choose a health professional based on guidance from referral sources and recommendations from friends, family members and co-workers. Today, health consumers increasingly seek information via a web search, provider list or online directory. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, more than half of Americans (59 percent) have looked online for health information ("Mobile Health 2010," pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Mobile-Health-2010.aspx). That figure is poised to grow as even more of us access the Internet from our laptops and cell phones. These circumstances create a prime opportunity for psychologists to use branding concepts as effective tools to hone their professional image and solidify their marketplace position.

This article will help you better understand the concept of branding, how it applies to your practice and steps you can take to start actively shaping your professional image in the community.

### What Is a Brand?

Branding is not just about having a logo, a catchy slogan or an eye-catching advertisement. It is about communicating unique strengths so you are seen as the preferred choice. Like a brand, your professional image reflects the way people think and feel about your practice.

Branding has both physical and psychological dimensions that relate to defining your professional image. Physical elements include the name of your practice, and the slogan you use on your website and other promotional materials. They also include distinctive graphic elements such as colors, fonts, logos and other art that you use in communication vehicles.

On your website, blog and social media accounts, utilize physical elements to capture the image of your practice you want to convey. For example, a psychologist who works with corporate executives will likely use different design elements than a psychologist who focuses on treating children with ADHD or a neuropsychologist who works in a rehabilitation setting for sport-related injuries. When setting up your online profiles or contracting with a web designer, consider what look and feel would be best suited to your practice and clientele.

“My website [reflects] my personal brand,” says Deborah Serani, PsyD, a Long Island, NY, psychologist specializing in trauma and depression. It’s an opportunity “to create a little niche for myself… the unique experiences I have as a psychologist…. On my blog, I take that brand further and offer more personal and creative thoughts.”

Psychologically, your professional image affects the way others perceive your practice, the value of the services you provide and the type of client who comes to see you. All of these factors can influence whether you get the referral, if a potential client chooses you and what rates people are willing to pay for your services. For the physical elements...
listed above, consider how each looks and sounds, what it reminds people of, what emotions it elicits, what beliefs and values it communicates and what population it appeals to.

**Using Branding Concepts to Develop Your Professional Image**

Whether or not you are aware of it, you already have an image that may or may not be consistent with the way you want to be perceived. Many psychologists do not adequately understand the way they are seen by clients, colleagues, payers and members of the community and do not strategically and purposefully define their own image.

“Whether or not you are aware of it, you already have an image that may or may not be consistent with the way you want to be perceived.”

Ali Mattu, a graduate student pursuing his PhD in clinical psychology at The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, believes that proactive branding is particularly crucial for fellow grad students and early career psychologists. “We choose graduate programs based on our unique interests and engage in internships and post-docs to develop clinical specialties—all of these efforts converge in creating a brand,” says Mattu. “That brand is worthless, however, if it remains in a silo.”

Consider the following suggestions for developing and communicating your professional image:

**Define a distinct image.** Write a single sentence that clearly defines how you want people to view your practice. An effective statement should reflect your mission and values, leverage your strengths and address the needs of your target market. Your mission statement and business plan should provide most of the information you need. “I encourage all professionals I work with to develop a professional mission statement to make effective and efficient decisions,” says David Palmiter, PhD, of Clarks Summit, PA.

**Stand out from the crowd.** The main purpose of your professional image is to communicate how your practice is unique. Claiming that your services are “high quality” is not enough to set you apart. Choose an aspect of your practice that differs from your competitors, cannot be easily duplicated and that clients value. For example, if you provide family therapy for cancer patients and have well-established relationships with the oncologists in your community, emphasize your ability to work collaboratively with the treatment team to help the family through the process. Palmiter has staked a presence in the area of parenting, with a blog (hecticparents.com), a Twitter account (@helpingparents) and ownership of no fewer than ten Internet domain names on the same or related themes that all point to his practice website.

Don’t try to communicate that you can be everything to everybody. Emphasize what you can be the best at and deliver consistently. In addition to giving you a competitive advantage, the differentiation expressed by your professional image is also valuable to potential clients and referral sources. Your image conveys your strengths and provides prospective clients and referral sources with a better understanding of the circumstances in which your services are appropriate and desirable.

**Communicate consistently.** Once you have defined your professional image and considered how to differentiate your practice, it is time to create a communication plan.
Does Your Professional Image Reflect Your Strengths?

Identify each of your target audiences (such as clients, referral sources, colleagues and payers), the communication vehicles you have that reach each audience and the purpose of each communication. Think about how to communicate your image in a way that tailors the message to each audience and purpose while maintaining a consistent message.

Keep your message simple and focused, make sure it reflects your professional image, repeat the same message and include the same physical elements (such as logo, slogan and colors) year-to-year in all of your promotional materials. The effects of marketing are cumulative, so consistency is key.

**Evaluate and revise.** Monitor the results of your efforts and adjust your approach as needed. There are many different ways to track your results. They range from inexpensive, informal efforts, such as talking with colleagues and having friends and family members provide feedback about your promotional materials, to more in-depth market research, such as client satisfaction surveys and focus groups.

**Key Outcomes**

Whether you are in private practice, work in a counseling center or community-based agency or have a consulting business, try to answer the following questions about the effectiveness of your efforts to define and manage your brand:

- How visible is your practice in the local community?
- How aware of your practice are potential clients and referral sources?
- How do potential clients and referral sources perceive your practice? How would they describe you to others?
- How well do people understand the way your practice is unique?

“Your professional image should be reflected clearly in all the materials you use to market and promote your practice.”

- Is the aspect that sets you apart perceived as valuable to potential clients and referral sources? Does it differentiate you from your competitors?
- Do all of your promotional materials reflect the professional image you want to convey?
- Are your clients and referral sources satisfied with your practice and the services you provide? What is their experience interacting with you and your staff?

**Data Sources**

Your professional image should be reflected clearly in all the materials you use to market and promote your practice. In order to strengthen your marketing activities, it is important to collect and analyze market data resulting from your efforts. These data are available from a variety of sources and can be gathered using both formal and informal mechanisms.

Following are some methods of accessing this type of information:

- **Review all of your marketing materials.** Systematically evaluate promotional materials, letters, reports, voice mail messages, office decor and the way your office phone is answered. Do they communicate the professional image you have defined? Do all of them include the same message and graphic elements? Are they tailored to the audience they are intended for? Make any necessary adjustments to fit the image you want to convey.

- **Seek feedback on your marketing materials from trusted colleagues, friends and family members.** Be aware of inherent bias. Choose individuals who will be honest with you, provide them with a description of the market segment you are trying to reach and explain the purpose and nature of the feedback desired. Be sure not to be defensive when faced with criticism. Remember,
constructive feedback will help you improve your marketing materials and get better results.

- **Systematically track your referral sources.** Include professional referrals, advertisements and contacts that result from public speaking engagements, community involvement and other networking activities. During your initial contact with new clients, collect data about how they found out about you. This task can be as simple as adding one question to your intake form or just asking a new client when he or she calls to schedule the first appointment.

- **Periodically administer a client satisfaction survey.** Use the resulting data to identify areas in need of development and let clients know you are listening by addressing concerns, implementing realistic suggestions and communicating those changes in vehicles such as your practice newsletter, memos posted in your waiting room or a brief letter to your clients.

Every person with whom you interact is a potential client or referral source. Every document and communication from your practice is a marketing tool that can make or break a potential referral. By defining how you want others to perceive you and your practice and ensuring that your materials and the way you present yourself are consistent with that image, you can better reach those who could benefit from your services, help them make effective treatment decisions and drive business to your door.

The Reimbursement section of the Practice Central website at apapracticecentral.org provides additional guidance about claims submission and follow-up. Numerous articles on billing and coding for your services are accessible to members of the APA Practice Organization at apapracticecentral.org/reimbursement/billing/index.aspx.

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**FOR MORE HELP**

Staking Your Claim  *continued from page 7*

- **One more tip:** Psychologists in states with prompt payment laws may be able to use these laws to press insurance companies to pay claims within the required time. These laws typically require the company to pay within 30 days of receiving a “clean claim” that contains all the information a payer needs to process the claim.

And a final important consideration: Consider who should deal with time-consuming insurance company interactions including submitting claims and handling denials. While some psychologists conduct these activities on their own, others hire support staff or engage an outside billing service. Using others to handle the administrative demands frees up the psychologist to devote more time to revenue-producing professional activities.

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**IMPORTANT DEADLINE FOR MEDICARE PROVIDERS**

By December 31, 2010, all Medicare providers must enroll or verify enrollment information via the Medicare Provider Enrollment, Chain and Ownership System (PECOS). Failure to register with PECOS will result in the denial of Medicare claims as of January 1, 2011.

PECOS is an Internet-based system for mandatory Medicare provider enrollment that verifies providers have a valid National Provider Identifier (NPI). Providers who enrolled prior to 2003 or who have not updated their enrollment information since 2003 should verify their enrollment status to ensure that they are included.

In order to enroll, providers must have a web user account with the National Plan and Provider Enumeration System (NPPES) administered by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), and must have an established NPI. However, simply having an NPI does not guarantee that providers are enrolled.

After January 1, 2011, if a psychologist or a referring physician who is not enrolled in PECOS is listed on a Medicare claim, the claim will be denied.

The PECOS system and registration instructions can be accessed online through the secure Medicare enrollment site at https://pecos.cms.hhs.gov/pecos/login.do.