

## Change Your Focus to Find Opportunities

# How to Thrive During a Recession

by Debra Koerner

**T**he best way to change something is to change the way you think about it. For example, if you do a quick online search for “2009 economy,” within seconds you’ll be inundated with articles about how bad things are. It would be easy to get drawn into reading these stories—but if you read between the lines, you’ll find plenty of economic opportunities available right now.

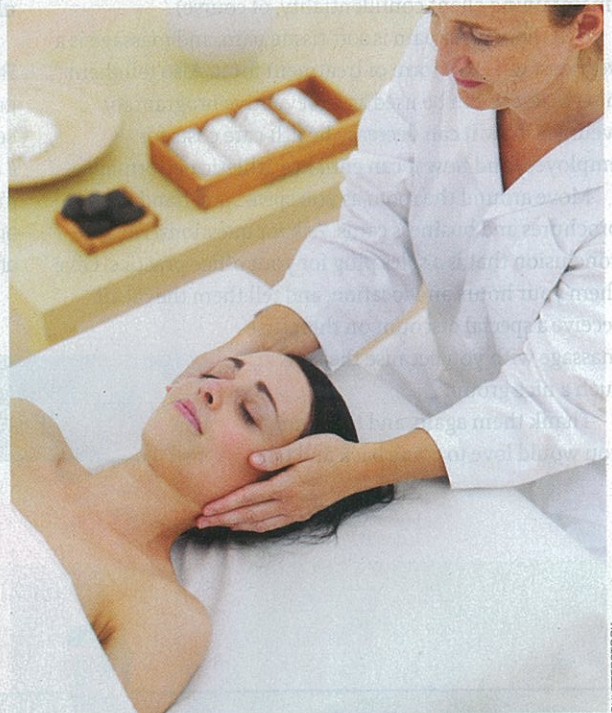
Even in this economy, there are many ways massage therapists can thrive in their chosen profession. The International Spa Association (ISPA), for example, reports day spa visits are up. ISPA also reports the position with the most openings within the spa industry is massage therapist. In addition, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports employment for massage therapists is expected to increase 20 percent between now and 2016.

Consumers are tightening their belts—and one result of that is decreased travel to remote destinations. Instead, people are seeking experiences and short vacations closer to home. With the right marketing, this could mean more business for local massage therapists.

The recession has also led to increased stress. That combined with the public’s increased use of complementary therapies for preventive health could add up to increased demand for your massage services. Again, though, how you market those services is key.

### Stand out from the crowd

There are many fish in the ocean—and when swimming in groups, they tend to blend together into a



single mass of shiny, moving scales. This is beneficial for small fish because a shark will not seek them out individually. But as a savvy massage therapist trying to build a practice, your philosophy should be the opposite of the small fish. You should strategically create a unique identity aligned with your passion, and then market your differences to the world.

This difference will attract the people you truly want to work with. Remember, though, it is not enough just to be different; potential clients have to notice the difference and believe the difference fits their need better.

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For example, I often see ads where a therapist offers Swedish, hot stone, deep tissue, pregnancy and any other type of massage she happens to have taken a class in. From a consumer perspective, this diluted form of advertising indicates a lack of skill in any one area and often will encourage those with specific needs to look for someone who seems more knowledgeable.

Instead, figure out what type of work you love to do, and then position yourself as an expert. You will attract clients who see you as being more qualified than your competition.

### Craft a flawless experience

By deciding to attract certain types of clients, you can also create your core experience to exceed their needs, while still accommodating others. For example, if you decide to become an expert at prenatal massage, many elements of your experience would be aimed at



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supporting what pregnant women are most interested in. Their needs, and thus the experience, would be very different from a professional athlete clientele.

To build this experience, imagine you are the client, and assess every aspect of your business. Is everything you are saying, doing and displaying supporting their needs? Conduct your own experiential review by analyzing your ads, business collateral, website, blog, waiting room, artwork, intake process, music, scents and anything else that interacts with your client. Do not be afraid to ask existing clients their opinions. To create a flawless experience, you must take the time to assess these touch points and align them to your perfect client.

### The marketing client

When you are ready to attract your perfect client, one inexpensive way to get the word out is to link yourself with connectors. Take "Mary," for example. She is a busybody who loves to go out. She volunteers, has a job in sales and an active social life. More than likely, you will find her on several social networking sites. Mary is a connector. Your goal is to find people like her and make them raving fans of your work.

Connectors are not always in your tight circle of friends and family, but rather are acquaintances who run in completely different circles. Start asking people you know if they know people like Mary. Once you solidify relationships with connectors, you

are literally one person away from hundreds of potential clients.

One therapist said he sought out people he knew are connectors and offered them a free massage. He was upfront with them and acknowledged their ability to communicate with many others. He let them know he wanted them to experience his work and talk about it with their connections. This translated to eight regular clients just by using this simple tactic.



Visit [www.massagemag.com/bottomgrow](http://www.massagemag.com/bottomgrow) to read 10 Ways to "Grow Your Bottom Line through Retail," by Bob Poirier and Lynda Solien-Wolfe.

Another therapist found a connector in a small community. She would travel one day each week and do massage in the connector's hometown. The connector would even help the therapist set up the appointments, because she liked to help her friends.

Another way to find linked-in people is to increase your networking by attending local events, business meetings, community classes and social gatherings. You are bound to run into great people who will help you grow your business.

## Build loyalty

Many companies have perfected the fine art of turning clients into loyal customers. You can do this, too. The first step to building loyalty is by continually improving your client experience, but there are other strategic ways to ensure your clients come back.

First, consider taking a treatment plan approach. Once you assess a client and understand his conditions, encourage him to return by creating a customized, multi-session plan. Educate him on the cumulative effect of massage therapy. This process moves you away from a session-by-session plan to one which has a beginning, middle and eventually a maintenance schedule. During the progression, revisit the client's original presentation of conditions and discuss his progression.

Another way to improve loyalty is to simply and purposefully stay in touch. There are many inexpensive e-mail programs which allow you to professionally communicate with your clients. Create personalized, informative messages and encourage them to forward them to friends and family. Use this type of correspondence to promote specials or gift certificates. Another way to garner loyalty is to simply remember their stories. Take a few extra minutes to include their stories, comments and questions in your SOAP notes. When appropriate, mention these facts or provide answers in conversations to let your clients know you listen to and remember them.

## Survive any economy

By following these steps, you will have a great start to building a practice that will survive any economy. Most importantly, you can remove fear from your paradigm and focus only on those things you can control as you move toward long-term success.

Debra Koerner has a wide array of business knowledge, including customer experience development, marketing and facilitating workshops. After discovering more than 55,000 therapists were leaving annually due to physical burnout and business naivety, she left her job and helped found imassage, Inc. to prevent these situations from happening. imassage offers workshops in deep-tissue and hot-stone massage, as well as business. All classes incorporate proven techniques to keep therapists practicing longer. Visit [www.imassageinc.com](http://www.imassageinc.com) for class dates and spa programs. Contact Koerner at [debra@imassageinc.com](mailto:debra@imassageinc.com). 

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