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Marketing Tools

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NICHE MARKETING: Helping clients succeed on tests and professional exams

At first blush, the market for this niche seems limited. But it's broader than you probably think. "The world is full of exams," says Eric Johnson, a test anxiety and test prep specialist in Portland, ME. "So many people in all kinds of work have to take exams now--health care professionals, real estate and insurance agents, payroll clerks, car mechanics, computer technicians...And there are Civil Service exams, too."

The three clinicians featured in this report have made treating test anxiety--with both kids and adults--a focus of their work. They tell us that this niche, while short-term, can also be quite lucrative. It's all self-pay. And the clients are well-motivated since doing well on their exams--for the adults at least--actually increases their earning capacity.

- In her general therapy practice in the San Francisco Bay area, Claire Stone gets about \$60 per session from managed care payors. But for test anxiety, she collects her usual and customary rate: \$95 per session. Who are these clients? Usually, she says, "they come in after they've taken the test once and haven't done as well as they'd like...They start as young as 16, for the SAT. Then there are young adults taking their GREs or GMATs. I have adults up to 40 years old for nursing and other state licensing exams. And at the moment, I'm seeing a member of the Coast Guard.

What does this work involve? "Most of them are also seeing a tutor to help with test strategy," she goes on. "So I focus on the anxiety...Some people really feel it in their bodies. Others don't feel it physically so much, but their negative thinking is really loud--so we work with positive counter-statements. Then we do guided visualization and guided relaxation, helping them to learn how to breathe."

For Stone, this niche is seasonal, with traffic increasing in the month or so before the SAT is given, several times a year. "I'll have 5-10 active test anxiety clients during each of four time periods--May, August, November, and right after the New Year." Treatment is brief: usually 3-4 sessions.

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A potentially great niche – but ‘yucky’

Why aren't more therapists helping clients with test anxiety? Eric Johnson has an idea about that. "It's potentially a great niche, especially if you like the process. I find tests to be a fun game, but a lot of mental health people don't. People in our field find standardized tests to be repulsive, yucky."

Johnson has just a handful of test prep clients at the moment, though he's had a steady stream through his Portland, ME, office over the years. Until recently, he ran a general practice with a heavy Medicaid caseload. Now, he's working to make test prep a full-time thing. In fact, he's calling his practice Test Prep Services.

"I taught for a national test prep company for three years, just before I went to back to grad school to get my therapy credential," he tells us. As a result, he can help with specific test-taking strategy.

"For people who just want to pass a test, maybe a test they've failed before, I will do test prep coaching which is a purely educational service. And I also market myself as a therapist for people with test anxiety.

"A majority of people I see are adults, 22 to 52. They have to take the GRE or a professional licensing exam, and they're getting killed by test anxiety."

Other clients see him as part of their preparations for the LSAT, GMAT, bar exam, or for licensing exams in the financial services industry, nursing, clinical social work, and licensed professional counseling.

"People who are smart and good students, but who do badly on tests, are my best customers," he explains. "They hate tests, so in a way it's negative. But they want to learn, and it's fun to teach someone who wants to learn."

At present, all of Johnson's clients are face-to-face. "But I'm probably going to move into using the telephone and the Internet."

He's particularly enthusiastic about the potential of video-conferencing. "Anyone who's taken the SAT, LSAT, or GRE has taken the same test in California that they're taking in Maine. Anyone who has test anxiety has the same test anxiety."

Johnson's standard rate is \$110 per hour, or \$150 for a 90-minute session. (He also offers "double occupancy" rates for two or more test prep clients who have similar scores and goals—see his Web sites for more on that.)

You can reach Eric Johnson in Portland, ME, at (207)773-7993, ext. 21, or see him online at www.testprep-services.net, and www.testprepmaine.com.

"Four is ideal," she tells us. Only rarely does a test anxiety client stay on for more therapy.

When it comes to marketing, Stone relies on three referral sources. First is a pair of Web sites: one dedicated to the test niche--www.test-anxiety.com; and one for her general practice--www.berkeleytherapist.org. The second is an academic tutor who knows her work.

The third marketing tool is a modest but effective direct mail campaign. She sends a brochure (reproduced on the opposite page) to just a dozen private and public schools, and just once a year. "But it works--especially the private schools." The piece is simple--a single sheet of heavy stock, small enough to fit in an ordinary envelope without folding.

Stone joins Eric Johnson, quoted above, in saying this an underserved niche. "I get calls from all over, people who've seen my Web site, who ask if I know of anyone near them doing this. But I don't. I don't know anyone else who's doing this."

Incidentally, although she hasn't pursued it, there seems to be a natural tie-in with sports psychology and performance enhancement. "The clients I work with who are also athletes will come in and say, 'I had a game last night and I did much better.'"

In her general practice, Stone sees a mix of managed care and private

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Test-Taking Anxiety

Claire Stone, MFT
Licensed Marriage &
Family Therapist

Do you panic when taking a test and feel that you underperform? There are some effective techniques that can help if you...

- Reread questions
- Stare at the page because your mind goes blank
- Can't remember the material even though you know it
- Think about something other than the test
- Tell yourself you can't succeed
- Compare yourself to other students
- Feel anxious and unfocused



I can help you learn how to stay calm and focused while taking tests. It is possible to remember the material under pressure and get the score that you deserve.



I am a licensed psychotherapist who helps people manage their anxiety. I coach adolescents through the SAT exam and also help them do their best on tests. I also counsel teens through other life challenges they face.



Call for a free consultation and discuss your situation with me. You can learn how to manage your anxiety.

Offices in North Berkeley
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pay clients--up to 20 per week. She concedes that her \$95 "usual and customary" is low for the Bay Area, but says there's a good reason for that. "People can afford to stay longer." She tells us she has self-pay clients who stay for as long as two or three years. "I like to work long-term," she says.

● In Columbia, MD, Betty Caldwell takes a group approach to this niche. "I call them classes or seminars," she tells us. Caldwell is not a licensed clinician, but her approach is one that *PsyFin* readers may find worth emulating. Most of the year, she says, she has two active classes going--with between 15 and 25 members apiece. "I'm full August through April."

"With adults I go as high as 25 members per class," she continues. "With the kids, I don't like to get above 15."

She started with kids, she tells us, but "now it's rapidly expanding to adult professionals...I've had students as young as sixth grade, up to surgeons who are taking a specialized do-or-die exam." Caldwell describes her classes--for both adults and kids--as interactive. "They learn from each other. It takes the onus off the individual."

What are the classes about? "I started out thinking it was all about stress reduction. But having immersed myself in it and seeing what the needs are, I've changed it. We do a lot of work around learning styles now."

What does that mean? It comes down to how information is recalled. "I help them learn what their learning style is, and what the implications are for a test. We adjust the way they study to create 'test ready knowledge.' For example, if you're a visual learner--which means your brain turns information into visual images--then you need help turning the images into language."

The program consists of four 2-hour classes, held once a week for four consecutive weeks. Until recently, she charged everyone \$185 for the entire program. "But when the economy went south, I went with a sliding scale, and the parents especially have been grateful for that."

On the other hand, not everyone needs the break. Caldwell also does some one-on-one coaching with her adult clients--perhaps two or three at any given time. Most often, these are people facing certification or recertification exams. She prefers not to pin her individual rates down, but says clients who see her three or four times pay "under \$1,000."

Why so much? Because for these clients, it's worth it. They come from "a variety of fields, including medical and med-tech fields like radiology...A person I was working with yesterday told me that as a result of passing an exam, she got a \$25,000 bump in pay. That's a big exam."

As far as marketing goes, "the adults seem to find me through my Web site...For the students, I work closely with schools. I serve on student service committees, and meet one-one-one with people whenever I can."

For clinicians trying to crack the school market, Caldwell recommends focusing on guidance counselors. "Meet with the heads of guidance," she says. "Because interestingly, in school systems, study skills are seen as the purview of guidance counselors, not teachers."

By the way, Caldwell is holding her seminars in school classrooms. "I pay the going rate, which around here is \$25 per hour...I'm set up as a non-profit, which makes that possible."

Contacts: 1) Betty Caldwell, Columbia, MD, 410-740-4659, www.stressless-tests.org; 2) Claire Stone, North Berkeley, CA, (510)868-1874, www.berkeley-therapist.org.

Root causes

Before some clients can address their test anxiety, Claire Stone says, they have to address deeper problems

"Some of the younger ones have all this family stuff--about expectations, or the messages they received from a parent. Some kids grow up with negative messages about how they can't succeed, or that they're not smart enough.

"So then I'll do inner parent work before we even get to the test visualization. I do work around healing that wound."