Biofeedback
Volume 52, Issue 3, pp. 79–84
DOI: 10.5298/1081-5937.52.03.10

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PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

The Business of Neurofeedback: Keys to a Successful Practice

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Keywords: neurofeedback practice, business acumen, branding strategies, client tracking, financial management

Establishing a successful neurofeedback practice requires not only clinical expertise, but also strong business acumen. Many of the suggestions in this article apply to those with biofeedback and related practices as well. This article reviews tips on leveraging resources from national organizations and local economic development options. Building a compelling brand with professional logos and adhering to ethical advertising standards are essential. A robust web presence, bolstered by effective search engine optimization, enhances visibility. Tracking client inquiries and analyzing referral sources can guide strategic decisions. Additionally, managing finances prudently and optimizing time-management skills are crucial for sustained success and personal fulfillment in this specialized field.

Establishing a thriving neurofeedback practice requires more than clinical expertise. It requires business acumen and strategic planning, and yet these essential topics are rarely addressed in our education and professional training. Drawing from personal experience and community resources, I outline some key considerations for developing a successful neurofeedback practice.

Business Development Resources

Support for entrepreneurs wanting to sharpen their business skills can be found on offer from local and national organizations such as the Small Business Administration (SBA.gov). Most people are aware that the SBA can be a source for loan money to small businesses, but the SBA also offers classes and mentoring opportunities through programs such as SCORE. SCORE is a free program that partners a business owner with a volunteer who has business experience in their field. SCORE partnered me with a former hospital chief operating officer who now runs a consulting business. Gregg was an amazing cheerleader for me. He'd come to my office every few months; I'd tell him about my goals and challenges, and he'd give me tips and advice. We did that for years, and I found it extremely helpful even if Gregg didn't know anything about neurofeedback specifically.

Additionally, educational institutions and city initiatives can provide invaluable support. In my area, I discovered clinics offered by the business and law schools at the University of Virginia that match entrepreneurs with graduate students to provide real-world experience for the student in assisting clients under the supervision of their professors: a win–win as I was able to get free legal and business support while also helping students with some real-world experience that would be hard for them to get through other means.

Local economic development offices often have programs and grants for entrepreneurs. I found out that the City of Charlottesville's Office of Economic Development (OED) offered a grant program called Advancing Charlottesville Entrepreneurs, the goal of which is to help increase revenue and business capacity through business analysis and a business needs assessment. I worked with the OED staff and a business consultant to create a plan to accomplish my business goals over a three-month period. Ultimately, this grant funded a photo shoot and a new website for my practice! I'm always happy to pay my state taxes now.

Local nonprofit organizations aimed at supporting entrepreneurs may also exist in your area and are worth exploring for support. I took a 16-week micro-MBA program offered by a nonprofit organization called the Community Investment Collaborative. This collaborative helps underresourced, minority- and women-owned businesses develop or elevate and refine their business plan.

Another option is to engage the services of a business consultant. I have done this as well and found a person specializing in supporting women entrepreneurs in health care. She was able to provide me with a framework to address niche issues specific to my practice and specialty that some of the other programs and support I had found were not able to provide.

Crafting a Strong Brand and Logo

Effective branding goes beyond just aesthetics; it should communicate your practice's values, expertise, and commitment to client care. Your brand is an intangible element that should elicit all the feelings and concepts that you want to transmit to people through images and words. Clarifying your core messages, service offerings, and the desired client experience will prepare you to create a cohesive and effective brand identity.

For instance, you may want to emphasize gold-standard neurofeedback services alongside a nurturing environment underscoring professionalism and empathy. How can you convey those ideals in the ways you present yourself to clients? How do you want them to feel when they arrive at your website?

Once you have a brand concept, consider consulting with a graphic designer to develop a logo that embodies your brand. Maybe a brain or brainwaves will be what you choose, but before you jump to those literal and often-used logo ideas, take a look around at existing logos to which you're attracted to find inspiration and maybe help you to think outside the box a bit more. You can use an online service (Fiverr.com or Thumbtack.com, for example) to create an inexpensive logo or consider contracting a graphic designer.

Professional Standards in Advertising

Once you have established the ideas and feeling that you want your brand to convey, it's important to ensure that all written content in your marketing and advertising adheres to the ethical standards of your licensing board and the neurofeedback/biofeedback societies. It is very important that your wording avoids making claims of what you or your techniques can do for clients. As Hammond et al. (2011, p. 63) state in their *Journal of Neurotherapy* article "Standards of Practice in Neurofeedback and Neurotherapy," "Serious harm is done to the scientific credibility of neurofeedback by advertising based on unsubstantiated claims, and such advertising is unethical."

Before publishing website or marketing content, consult with the Biofeedback Certification International Alliance (BCIA, 2016) Professional Standards, Section E, Public Statements; the Association for Applied Psychophysiology and Biofeedback (AAPB, 2013) Standards for Performing Biofeedback, Issues in Advertising Biofeedback-Based Services; and the International Society for Neuroregulation and Research Professional Standards and Ethical Principles, Section E, Public Statements (https://isnr.org/interested-professionals/isnr-code-of-ethics) as well as the position paper by Corydon Hammond et al., Standards of Practice in Neurofeedback and Neurotherapy (https://www.isnr-jnt.org/article/view/16583), notably the section titled "Training, Advertising and Equipment Sales." Finally, consult the standards from your state licensing board.

As Jay Gunkelman Often Says: "Attempt Much, Claim Little"

The Wexler et al. (2020) critical article, "Neuroenhancement for Sale," examines the claims of nearly 400 websites of neurofeedback practitioners. This is a great list of what not to do! We need to avoid not just expressed claims, but also implied claims and statements of puffery, such as "I run Virginia's best neurofeedback clinic." If you do want to speak to issues/diagnoses that can be addressed (not treated!) with neurofeedback training (not treatment!), then refer to the AAPB Fourth Edition *Evidence-Based Practice in Biofeedback and Neurofeedback*, available in the AAPB store online (Khazan et al., 2023). Consult with your licensing scope of practice and make sure you list only disorders that fit into that scope and your area of expertise.

Web Presence and Other Advertising Tips

I cannot emphasize how important your website is! When I first started in 2009, my practice had a homemade, static web page, including some photos we took of ourselves for headshots. In 2013, when I received the ACE grant through the City of Charlottesville, some of the grant funds were allocated to improving my website. Through the analysis that program offered, I learned that more than 50% of the views to our sad little page were on phones! It was not a mobile-friendly site, so I was horrified. Working with a web designer and getting professional photographs taken resulted in the website I have now. I have clients tell me that they found it calming and helpful to see photographs of our clinicians that also showcase the exterior and interior of our office space. These great photos don't matter much if your website is buried on page three or four of a web search for services. Improving your search engine optimization is very important and may require the assistance of a professional who specializes in that area of advertising. I have had success in setting up Google AdWords and paying to ensure my site shows up in searches completed in my catchment area.

There are other avenues to advertise yourself beyond your business website. Ensure you are listed on the "Find a ractitioner" search with ISNR and AAPB if you are a member and on the BCIA website if you are already certified and keep those listings up to date.

In the past, I have reached out to support groups or other community organizations that are working for populations with which I work (attention deficit disorder, autism, brain injury) and offered to be a free guest speaker at one of their meetings. One of my favorite places to talk in my community is at the senior center. LinkedIn can provide another avenue to network and connect with other practitioners or potential clients. Additionally, visibility is increased with a paid listing on *Psychology Today* (https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists). In fact, I only activate my *Psychology Today* account occasionally as I get easily flooded with new inquiries from that service.

A few other suggestions from BCIA's own Judy Crawford include sending brochures or general information about the science behind biofeedback and neurofeedback to the school guidance counselor so that they may be aware of additional resources for their student population. Other referrals may be possible through networking with the counseling or health centers of colleges or universities in your area. Keep your eyes out for their open house announcements. These events are a great way to introduce yourself to their staff and share information about your practice.

Regional Colleague Analysis

This would typically be called a competitor analysis, but I operate from an attitude of abundance and do not see other practitioners as competitors, but as colleagues. Regardless, it's important to know who else in your area is offering neurofeedback/biofeedback, get to know them, and discover what kinds of clients they may specialize in working with and what equipment and special skills or training they have. Hopefully, in a spirit of collegial support and collaboration, you can also share details of your practice, training, and approach with your regional colleagues so that appropriate referrals can be made between you.

Identifying Your Clients

We track every inquiry that comes into our clinic by phone or email. Once a person calls, we create a document and begin to fill in information to track them as a potential client. We offer a 15–20 minute complimentary phone call to answer their questions and screen them as a potential candidate for our services. Additionally, we make sure to document who referred them and where they are located.

With the referral and location information mentioned, we can then perform analysis on the interest in our practice. For example, we received 97 calls or email inquiries in a six-month period, each with a potential client inquiry sheet to which to refer. Here's some of the information we gleaned from tracking those inquiries: One fifth of the calls were parents calling for a child, 75% of which were boys. Of the 97 inquiries, 21 became clients at our clinic. Half of that number were males under 18, and half were adult females. I also discovered that more than 50% of the 97 had found our website by Googling "neurofeedback." The others were either referred by another health care provider, a former client, or a friend/family member who had recommended or experienced neurofeedback elsewhere.

Further longitudinal analysis of the distribution of your clients by age and gender can be very helpful to truly understand who your clients are. Using that information, you can more effectively prepare to meet their needs and speak more directly to potential clients in that same demographic. Figure 1 is a chart showing the distribution of my clients by age and gender over a five-year period.

Reasons for Failure to Proceed

So what happened with those other 76 inquires that failed to become my clients? I always note the reason for the failure to proceed if it was known, such as financial considerations, reimbursement, or distance or whether it was an inappropriate referral. An additional follow-up a few weeks later would also be conducted to gauge continued interest in services. If they were no longer considering pursuing my services, I'd ask if they'd be kind enough to share with us the reasons why. Figure 2 shows findings from a six-month period of tracking incoming inquiries.

My practice was quite full, and I felt my pricing was average and acceptable for our region and offerings, so I did not feel I needed to reevaluate my pricing or lack of insurance reimbursement despite the high percentage of potential clients those factors ruled out. However, I was curious about the nearly 20% of clients who were calling from areas further away.

Catchment Area Analysis

In assessing the locations of the potential clients who had called that clinic, I could see that about half of those were located about an hour away in Richmond, Virginia, the largest city near Charlottesville. Some clients are willing to drive from Richmond for my services, and others are not. There are surprisingly few options for neurofeedback available in Richmond. This analysis sent me down a new line of thinking about training a clinician in Richmond and collaborating with them on an expansion of my practice in that area because I'd determined interest and need. I may not have been aware of this trend without collecting this data.

Track Referral Sources

An additional boon to collecting this data is that you can track who is sending you referrals even if those referrals

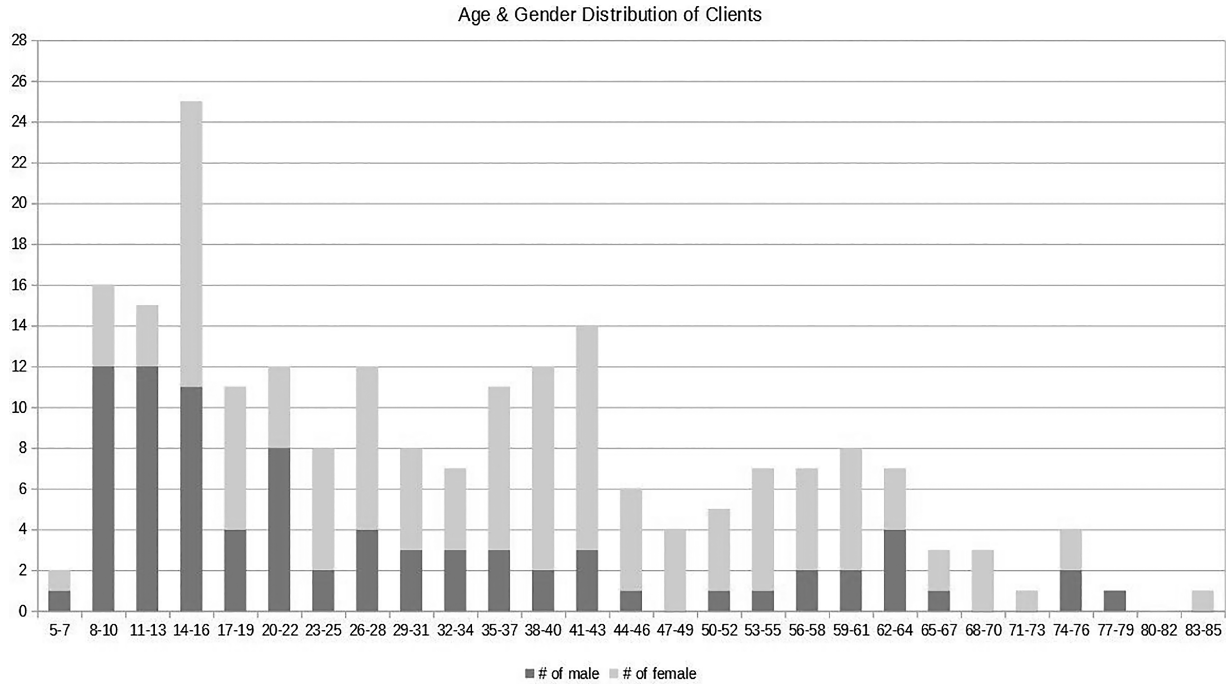

Figure 1. Distribution of my clients by age and gender over a five-year period.

don't follow through and become clients. If you keep a database of these referral sources, then you can reach out to thank them, educate them further about your services, and provide them with brochures or cards.

Financial Analysis and Insights

How do you price yourself? Considering what comparable health care services in your area cost is one way to help set your own fee schedule. Completing a break-even analysis is also a great way to assess the cost of doing business and can ensure you are charging a rate that allows you to be successful.

It's important to keep an eye on financial trends occurring in your business. Generating some simple graphs to reflect fluctuations in your income can help you to notice patterns that will provide valuable insight into your practice. Figure 3 is a simple spreadsheet showing my gross income per month over four years.

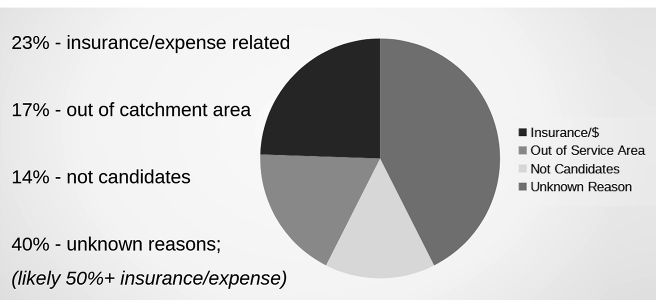

Figure 2. Results from six months of tracking incoming inquiries.

Notice the yellow bar denoting the year of 2020 and how it plummets with the onset of the pandemic and then starts to jump rather rapidly back up and past what I'd grossed in past months. That reflects when I began offering home training. The graph demonstrates how successful that addition to my practice continued to be into the next year. In analyzing a graph such as this, you can determine if there are months that tend to be consistently busier or slower for you, and that can help you plan when you take vacations or when to make sure you clear the decks to prepare for an influx of new clients. When I did a broader analysis over 10 years of my practice, I identified a flurry of new clients in mid to late summer, reflective mostly of parents seeking services to support their child as they entered a new school year. Why they wait until only a few weeks before school starts again, I'm not sure, but this allowed me then to consider implementing targeted marketing to this demographic in the spring and early summer to encourage them to engage with services earlier to assure sufficient time for more training sessions before school started again.

Pricing and Accounting

When I say pricing strategies, I'm talking about the idea of packages. I know a lot of practitioners who offer packages with maybe a slight discount if a client purchases a four- or 10-pack of sessions in hopes also that the client is more

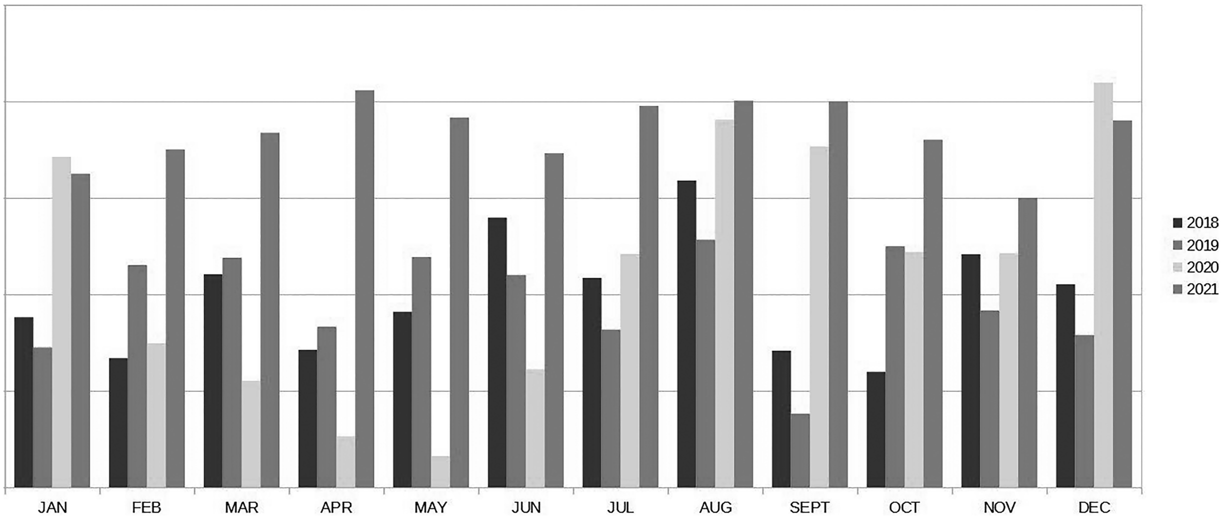

Figure 3. Gross income per month.

committed to completing enough sessions to show some changes. Consider gym memberships. People purchase several sessions to help ensure that they go in a consistent manner until they feel more comfortable and begin to enjoy this new activity. Going once will not allow them to notice a positive change. Although this strategy works well for some clinicians, I personally prefer a pay-as-you-go method with regular evaluation of progress to determine the duration of the client's engagement with my services. If you are considering offering packages of sessions, please do make ethical and fair contingencies for cases in which the client wants to terminate services before a package is complete.

As a sole proprietor, we wear so many hats, and it's important to be aware of how you are spending your time, striving to work at the top of your license. This means that the majority of the tasks that take up your time should be those that only someone with your specific education, licensure, and skill set can complete. If you are spending a significant portion of your day with time-sensitive administrative and scheduling tasks, it may be time to seek support with those aspects of your practice. Could you hire an accountant or bookkeeper and then make room and have the energy to see one or two more clients a week?

Report Writing and Record Keeping

Your reputation depends on a professional presentation of your practice to your clients, other health care providers, colleagues, and referral sources with whom you may be interacting. When a client gives you a release to share their progress or test results, it's important that your documents are well-written; have a clean, easy-to-read layout; and meet or exceed the standards laid out by your state licensing board as well as those within the field of bio/neurofeedback, quantitative electroencephalography (qEEG) and related services.

This is where the guidance of an International qEEG Certification Board– or BCIA-approved mentor can be really helpful. Your mentor may provide you with a template for various types of reports or may agree to proofread/edit your reports until you get the hang of it and develop your own. Seek out published articles that review the necessary and expected information that reports should include. For example, when developing a template for a qEEG report, two articles that will be helpful are the *Journal of Clinical Neurophysiology* article, "Guidelines for EEG Reporting" (Tatum et al., 2016) and the *Neurology* article, "How to Write an EEG Report: Dos and Don'ts" (Kaplan & Benbadis, 2013).

Tracking Neurofeedback and Biofeedback Sessions and Outcomes

It's important to track the details of your client sessions. This will serve you well in your learning, when seeking mentoring for your cases, and in treatment planning. You should be able to quickly reference the total number of sessions completed with a client, the protocols you've used, and the length of each training session as well as the client's responses and symptom changes over time. When you have to shuffle through files or open various software programs to try and piece together these types of data, the narrative of your client's progress is fragmented. Having a master document or spreadsheet for each client that tracks their sessions, logs all interventions used, and notes symptom ratings and other important data will improve your ability to conceptualize the case. Over time, you can also use these master tracking documents to learn about trends across clients and speak to the average number of sessions you complete with each person or the most common protocols you are utilizing.

Energy and Time Management

It's important to ask yourself if your practice is working for you or if you are working for your practice. How do you define success? Is it based on income, lifestyle, work hours, your happiness, or some blend of these factors? It's important to evaluate what fills you up and what drains you about your career. Where do you feel stretched thin? Where might you need support or to reevaluate how you're approaching something? Where do you want to focus more energy?

Once you evaluate those areas, then you can do several things to drill down, make changes, and set your course. One thing that I found extremely enlightening was to track my time—I mean down to the minute—for an entire week. Categorize what you're doing: scheduling clients, writing reports, requesting records, responding to client needs, managing interns/employees, marketing/advertising, professional development, networking—even interruptions; minor issues; and simple jobs such as email, office chores, time wasters, busywork, and trivial tasks, etc.

Where can you delegate or eliminate some of these things? Identify the tasks that you dislike the most and those that you enjoy. When I did this, I realized that I needed to hire a part-time administrative assistant to take over some of my scheduling and field potential client inquiries. That proved incredibly helpful and allowed me to see more clients, be much happier and less frustrated, and even freed up my creativity and energized me to explore new professional development opportunities. I also found that I was spending a lot of time answering the same questions over and over for potential new clients. In response, I recorded a series of one- to two-minute videos answering these common questions and embedded those into an initial email that interested people could sign up to receive.

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