

Rethinking Counselling Professional Services as Business: A Paradigm Shift

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Abstract

The counselling profession has traditionally been viewed through the lens of a helping, altruistic service, with the primary focus on the well-being of clients. However, this perspective often overlooks the business aspects of running a successful counselling practice. In today's competitive landscape, it is crucial to adopt a paradigm shift that recognizes counselling services as a professional business venture. This presentation argues for the reframing of counselling services as a business model, where the principles of entrepreneurship, marketing, and strategic planning are embraced. By adopting a business-centric approach, counsellors can enhance their visibility, reach a wider client base, and ensure the long-term sustainability of their practices. Effective branding, strategic marketing campaigns, and leveraging digital platforms are key components of this paradigm shift. Additionally, counsellors need to develop business acumen, including financial management, legal compliance, and operational efficiency. This all-inclusive approach will not only empower counsellors to thrive professionally but also enables them to deliver high-quality services to a broader range of clients. Furthermore, the paper advocates for the integration of entrepreneurial and business education into counselling curricula, equipping future professionals with the essential skills to navigate the complexities of running a successful practice. By embracing this model, counsellors can reconcile their commitment to client welfare with the realities of operating a viable and sustainable professional business enterprise.

Keywords: Business, Counselling, Professional services, Rethinking, Paradigm shift

Introduction

The traditional forms of counselling services are majorly based on face-to-face interactions between a counsellor and counselee(s). The interaction may be based on resolving mental health issues, educational issues, marital issues, career issues and so on. However, the COVID-19 global pandemic has brought about a new reality not just to Nigeria but the world in general in relation to mental health issues and financial breakdown, hence, bringing about a for change and transforming in the mode of service delivery by professionals. In a report made by the Congressional Research Service (2021), the total global economic effects of the pandemic continue

to mount. In particular, the prolonged nature of the health crisis is affecting the global economy beyond traditional measures with potentially long-lasting and far-reaching repercussions.

The Congressional Research Service (2021) further reiterated that economic forecasts reflect continuing risks to a sustained global recovery posed by a resurgence of infectious cases and potential inflationary pressures associated with pent-up consumer demand fueled by an increase in personal savings. On the supply side, shortages reflect lingering disruptions to labour markets, production and supply chain bottlenecks, and disruptions in global energy markets, and shipping and transportation constraints that are adding to inflationary pressures. Generally, many service providers have moved from the physical mode of service delivery to the digital mode. Also, many individuals and groups across different age demography have been exploring numerous digital methods of generating wealth and earning a living.

In the case of counselling, the need for a strategic shift from the conventional services rendered and the conventional modes of service delivery is provoked by two major factors; the fast-rising need for mental health intervention and the global economic meltdown which has influence a need for diversification and in some cases, total transmission from the traditional methods or forms of service delivery to new methods/forms that are more technology or digital based in order to ensure seamless service delivery and sustainable source of income.

According to Duden, Gersdorf and Stengler (2022), services were closed intermittently or considerably reduced while online services were extensively expanded. Face-to-face services decreased, as did the work with therapeutic groups. Many inpatient units restructured their services to accommodate COVID-19 patients. While the digitalisation of services allowed for better access to services for some, restrictive measures hindered access for most. In order to meet up with the new demands and challenges, counsellors need to carve out new and sustainable ways for them to deliver effective services and earn sustainable income from their professional services. Achieving this feat may require more than just acquiring the knowledge of counselling but acquiring some other soft skills that can be of help to them in marketing and monetising their skills. Some of these soft skills include leadership skill, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, critical thinking, adaptability, time management, leadership, creativity.

The demand for different counselling services has been on a high rise in recent times due to the emergence and escalation of different problems affecting both individuals and the society as a whole. However, counsellors are still unable to make the best of the promises of the profession

and the prospects in the demands for it in the society. This paper therefore seeks to enlighten counsellors and other relevant stakeholders on how counselling can be commercialised outside the conventional methods and how counselling services can be marketed in order to generate sustainable income without compromising its primary purpose which is to provide help services to individuals and groups.

Contemporary Methods of Commercialising Counselling in Nigeria

Many methods of commercialisation and generating income have emerged in recent times. Using various mediums, professionals and non-professional (youths, most especially) have learnt and are improving on the use of these mediums to earn a living. Most of the new mediums are technology and digital based. Some of them are briefly explained in this paper.

Podcast

Podcasts are fast becoming a viable and reliable source of not just educating a large number of audience but to earn a living as well. A podcast according to Tidal (2021) is a digital-audio file that can be downloaded from the Internet either manually or by automated subscription. Not constrained to just audio, podcasts can also come in video format, commonly known as vodcasts or videocasts. Podcasting shares qualities with several traditional/conventional media; it is an auditory medium, like radio, though it is generally delivered automatically to listeners via a subscription, like a magazine or newspaper. Some scholars situate podcasting within the tradition of amateur and community radio. Unlike traditional institutions of broadcasting or platforms like YouTube or Twitter, podcasting is an open-source technology, self-governed by participants, listeners, and intermediaries (Brown, 2020).

A podcast can be done by an individual whereby he/she will invite one or more expert guest to have a discussion on a particular topic. It can as well be organised by a group of counsellors who will discuss one subject area; they can invite guest(s) or engage in the discussion without guest(s). Counsellors can organise podcasts to discuss critical and non-critical issues relating to different aspects of counselling that are most needed in the society today. Examples of issues counsellors can address include mental health issues, issues relating to stress management and time management, guides to picking the most suitable career path, issues relating to marriage, marital and pre-marital relationship issues, educational and academic topics, coping strategies for people living with disabilities or terminal illnesses.

Brown (2020) posited that podcasting has the potential to increase representation, to encourage activism, to reach underrepresented listeners and tell their stories. Since most podcasts are subscription based, counsellors can generate income for themselves through subscriptions by listeners apart from just creating awareness, enlightening the audience and advocating for positive changes in the society. They can also generate income from online streaming platforms. Several platforms have been created to allow for the uploading of podcasts, some of them include Spotify, boom play, Tidal etc. Some examples of podcasts in this regard include The Thoughtful Counsellor, Mental Illness Happy Hour, Therapy Chat, The Psychology Podcast, Private Practice Startup Podcast, Therapist Uncensored Podcast, Therapy for Black Girls, The Voice of Counselling, The Couples Therapist Couch.

Blogging

The Internet has brought many changes in the marketing world by combining many types of business models such as direct sales, affiliate marketing, product creation and marketing online. It is responsible for making the people all over the world benefit from media. Internet marketing has provisions for interactive learning as well as instant responses to queries. This makes Internet marketing unique. Blogs or weblogs form an integral part of internet marketing today. It has come at par with other platforms for personal communication such as e mails and social networking. There has been an exponential rise in the number of blogs in recent years. There has been a similar trend in the number of blog readers. It shows the popularity of blogs due to its less cost and wide reach (Laddha, 2020).

Blog marketing has the potential to satisfy the consumer by providing relevant information. As per Digital Insight 6.7 million+ people blog via blogging sites & 77% of internet users are reading Blogs. 12 million+ people blog via Social Networks, 23% of internet time is spent on blogs and social networks, Companies with a blog have 97% more inbound links than others, B2B marketers using blogs generate 67% more leads. The increasing trend of blog marketing by the companies leads me to study impact of the blogs on buying behaviour of consumer. The study has been carried out by using secondary and primary data 100 respondent (Laddha, 2020). With the data provided by Laddha (2020) above, it is evident and without doubt that blogging is a potential means of self-advertising and income generation. Through commercial blogging, counsellors can brand themselves by creating a niche for themselves in a particular aspect of counselling or in different aspects of counselling. They can make their blogs free access and generate income from

the traffic they get daily, weekly, or monthly. Some companies are turning away from up-front full price models, fearing that higher one-time prices deter customers from making purchases (Fitzgerald, 2024)

They can as well make it a subscription-based access whereby followers of the blog contents will have to pay a certain amount before they can have access to certain contents on the blog. When the blog is subscription based, a uniform price can be fixed for all subscribers, and it can be made in tiered form. Fitzgerald (2024) opined that tiered pricing is often a way to pull people in and steer them to an option that is the most appealing and at the same time the most profitable for the company. These offers will attract customers and motivate them to choose the subscription option over a one-time purchase. Counsellors can create a sense of exclusivity by limiting the number of new subscriptions available in a specific time period. You can also set a limited time window for people to join, generating a sense of urgency and motivation to take action.

Recurring revenue business models, often deployed through subscription or usage-based revenue streams, have become popular among software and technology vendors in recent years. But this emerging revenue stream is also creating new opportunities across most industrial sectors, including manufacturing, financial services, healthcare, media, business services, transportation and logistics, and leasing (Recvue, 2024).

Authorship

Book writing or authorship has been a popular and reliable means of generating income for individuals and groups over the years. Although, it is more of a talent than an acquired skill, counsellors who are gifted in writing can engage in writing books and drafting write-ups can write books on counselling related issues then publish them both online and physically; they may pick a specific field in counselling or pick from different aspects of it from time to time. Many online outlets for book publication have emerged over the past few years (e.g. Amazon, Open Books, De Gruyter etc.). Talented counsellors can make use of these outlets to publish their books and write-ups in e-book format, they can also make use of the manual publishing houses for a hardcopy version of their books. Through these two mediums, counsellors can generate revenue for themselves and earn a sustainable living.

Training and Coaching Services

While counsellors are primarily psychotherapists and problem-solvers, they are also potential trainers and coaches. In the counselling profession, counsellors are trained in areas of training and coaching both individuals and groups through the information services. In this regard, counsellors can delve into the training and coaching services area and organise seminars, workshops, short-term and long-term training programmes, coaching programmes etc. in different aspects of life such as career choice and career planning, emotional control and regulation, stress management, time management, emotional resilience, effective study habits, marital life coaching and so on.

In organising training and coaching programmes, counsellors may work with other counsellors cut across different fields, they may work with professionals in other related fields or work with NGOs or government agencies. Also, such programmes may be organised repeatedly or at intervals (weekly, monthly, quarterly, yearly etc.). Revenue can be generated from programmes like this through registration fees, payments for certificates, donations from governmental, non-governmental agencies or international organisations. Examples of programmes like this include Career counselling, World Coach Institute, Executive coaching, Education Specialist, Career change, Coach Training Alliance etc.

Ghost writing

Ghost writing basically means writing articles or books in proxy for one or more writing platforms. Ghost writers are paid according to different perimeters in line with the intuition of client but in most cases, they are paid per word or per page and the amount paid is usually determined by the eminence and level of the client financially. Counsellors may choose to write for clients in a specific aspect of counselling and they may choose to write for clients cutting across different types counselling or mental health fields. Examples of ghost-writing platforms relating to counselling include write right, Orange Publishers, Ghostwriter, Vox Ghost writer, Book writing Inc, Power Publishers etc.

Digital Products

As most of the services rendered by professionals today are being digitalised, counsellors also have a market for themselves in the digital age. As it stands today, counsellors have opportunities they can explore to make the best of the fast-rising digitalisation in the world today. For instance, counsellors may acquire skills and expertise in digital content creation such as skit

making, graphics designing, and the like. When counsellors acquire these skills, they may channel them to counselling specific areas like making frames containing mental health quotes, affirmation statements, skits passing messages addressing mental health issues or other issues counselling aims to address, in doing this, counsellors can sell their skills and still make the impact they received training in at the same.

Marketing Strategies for Counsellors

The level of competition among businesses in recent time has been on a high rise, and digital business enterprises are also not free from the intensity of this competition. One of the most effective ways of coping and maintaining a firm stand in the competitive atmosphere is through effective and strategic marketing. Counsellors can market their skills and services through various means including but not limited to developing a strong online presence by utilizing digital platforms, creating a physical presence, brand identity and consistency, client testimonials and case studies, blogging and article writing, referral incentives.

Developing a Strong Online Presence by Utilizing Digital Platforms

Online presence can be referred to as all activities and contents that an organisation, an individual or a business has under its name on the internet. These contents or activities may include social media accounts, online assets, interactions, and any pieces created by or about the person or business. The Internet is now reaching more than 4.57 billion people across the globe (Clement, 2020; Anagnoste, Biclesanu, Chailan, Negoiasa, 2020), facilitating the expansion of businesses' reach over frontiers.

According to Moore (2021), the topic of why businesses need an online presence and not only a physical location is important because most people are using the internet these days to find out information about a product or service. For a customer to easily search for a counsellor or his/her brand online, he/she would have a website which can be easily found and navigated online. Without this feature the counsellor or his/her brand will not be recognized by any one unless it is by word of mouth or driving by which does not have a very high marketing value.

Digital innovation transforms the way companies and individual brands sell online, as artificial intelligence (AI) makes it easier for consumers to find and purchase the items they see. Counsellors and counselling firms can start adopting robotic process automation (RPA) and application programming interfaces (APIs) in order to integrate cloud-based services, and follow

machine learning algorithms that build customer profiles based on both geographical location and individual preferences, chat solution integrations (e.g. Alexa, Siri), mobile app push notifications that keep the customers engaged, secure payment systems and fast delivery. In the years to come, developments in augmented reality could ease the difficulty of providing correct product or services information (Anagnoste, Biclesanu, Chailan, Negoiasa, 2020).

The study of Mahto & Mohan (2020) revealed that the SMEs surveyed have derived good degree of benefits in terms of bettering customer relations management, gaining good image at national level, enhancing efficiency of sales personnel, lowering cost, providing 24-hour accessibility to customers, achieving better customer satisfaction and providing better customer service while they have derived average benefits in terms of market expansion, bettering turnover and enhanced return on capital employed. They also found out that enhanced turnover, return on capital employed, 24-hour accessibility and providing better customer service are casting significant impact on satisfaction derived by the SMEs from their online presence.

In the study of Szuchs (2020) it was find out that companies and brands that do not use online solutions during their operations can be competitive but generally those present in the online space are more competitive, and use more sophisticated solutions in their business processes, which has a positive effect on several functions of the company.in other words, companies with online presence have a higher competitiveness index, which confirms that it is worth using online solutions for companies. An online presence that is strategic and structured from digital marketing strategies has numerous benefits to businesses and brands.

The combined use of corporate Facebook and Instagram, a robust website with wide online visibility and YouTube develops the image of companies on the Internet in the most effective way (Tarazona-Montoya, Devece, Llopis-Albert & García-Agreda, 2024). Online presence increases a brand's market reach. It helps to target its audience better. It improves user engagement. It allows the brand to build brand reputation. It helps in generating better revenues. Examples of a web presence for a person or brands could be a personal or brand website, a blog, a profile page, a wiki page, a social media point of presence (e.g. a LinkedIn profile, a Facebook account, or a Twitter account).

Networking and Collaborations

Having a physical presence in strategic locations can help counsellors market and sell their skills and services to a reliable customer/client base. As much as online presence is important,

creating physical presence is also as important as it will help the counsellor network with other professionals and potential clients and referral agents. Counsellors can network and create online presence through membership in professional bodies/associations, attending seminars and conferences etc.

Networking as a lot of benefits (Michael & Yukl, 1993; Thompson, 2005; Porter, Woo, Alonso, & Snyder, 2023) identified increased access to information, advice, influence, better job performance and other forms of “social capital” as some of the advantages of networking. Langford, 2000; Porter, Woo, Alonso & Snyder 2023) also counted professional advancement as some of its advantages. The main factors influencing a professional’s career success and marketability are education, connectivity/networking, performance, exposure, knowledge in organizational politics, proactive personality, organizational sponsorship, luck etc. Success in both personal and professional life depends mainly on a person’s ability to build a strong and meaningful relationship (Akkas, 2023).

People who engage in professional networking are often able to capitalize on their increased effectiveness to achieve long-term career success, such as more substantial salary increases, more job offers, and greater career satisfaction (Forret & Dougherty, 2004, Porter et al., 2016, Wolff & Moser, 2009, 2010; Porter, Woo, S. E., Alonso, N. A., & Snyder 2023).

Brand Identity and Consistency

In any business or profession, having a face and an identity is very important to achieve success. Branding helps a professional speak to and reach his/her target audience effectively without needing to do much in terms of explaining the services he/she renders. For instance, a mental health counsellor may to have a personal blog or website where he/she will post articles on mental issues. He/she will post contents relating to mental health on his/her social media pages and indicate his/her specialisation on his/her bio on social media platforms. Also, such professional will also present himself/herself to people in ways that will show what he/she specialises in. all of these will give the professional a face and help him/her have a community of people who will consume his/her contents and follow his/her activities in relation to what he/she presents himself/herself as.

Schau; Muñiz and Arnould (2009); Cheung, Vazquez and Conway, Vazquez and Conway (2018) posited that online brand communities significantly contribute to the co-creation of a brand

and the contents of a brand and brand community members are both providers and beneficiaries in the co-creation process. Thus, they engage in activities such as providing virtual word of mouth (WOM), generating product ideas, and contributing to brand value for other members (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Cheung, Vazquez & Conway, 2018). According to (Lorenzo-Romero et al., 2014; Cheung, Vazquez & Conway, 2018) the most significant contribution is that personal/professional branding motivates consumers to give instant feedbacks and devote themselves to the online brand community so that it is beneficial for idea generation and innovation.

A personal brand is about the self and one's personal attributes formed through a personal branding process which concerns the ways individuals present and communicate the self to others (Labrecque et al 2011; Cheung, Vazquez & Conway, 2018). Montoya and Vandehey (2008); Cheung, Vazquez and Conway (2018) opined that a personal brand is the clear, powerful, compelling public image about the self in the mind of others. This implies that the concept of a personal brand essentially depends on self-concept theories, such as self-image, self-identity, and the social self. An individual's image and identity seen and understood by others can therefore be regarded as a prominent theme in creating a personal brand.

However, apart from image and identity, a personal or professional brand also has to do with prospects and building relationships, and can also entail a mix of factors such as reputation, trust, and attention. Effective personal brands should be distinctive, relevant, specialisation-focused, consistent, and essentially convey two key pieces of information about the self to the target market: (1) who the individual is as a person, and (2) what the individual specialises in (Cheung, Vazquez & Conway, 2018). Creating and ensuring brand consistency and brand prospects are important aspects of marketing skills and services. It is therefore important for counsellors to be consistent with what they choose to present to their audience as it would in turn become part of their personal brand, and communicated to their audiences. Moreso, creating an authentic personal brand is argued to be a fundamental aspect of personal branding.

Referral Incentives

Referrals have emerged as a primary way through which businesses and entrepreneurs in the social networking era get new customers. Instead of spending money on conventional advertising and publicity, many companies now rely on social media-based and physical referral

programs to bring in new customers. Referral programs are used throughout the economy, but their use is particularly common among start-ups, where they are seen as both an affordable and an effective way to grow (Lobel, Sadler & Varshney, 2015). Referees can be among existing clients of the business, individuals or groups who are non-clients or entities contracted to bring in customers.

Referral programs come in many forms. Some companies pay customers for every new referral they bring in. Others pay customers only if they bring in sufficiently many referrals (Lobel, Sadler & Varshney, 2015). Linear payments, whereby every successful referral generates the same payment to the customer making referrals, are the simplest and probably the most common model of referral (Libel et al, 2015). According to Schmitt (2013), referred customers are more profitable and more loyal. In a study conducted by Schmitt (2013), it was found out that referred customers are, on average, 4.5 cents per day more profitable than other customers. Whereas the average contribution margin of non-referred customers is 30 cents/day, customers acquired through the referral program have a margin 7.6 cents/day higher, an increase of about 25 %. The difference in contribution margin is the highest in the first year after the acquisition, but decreases over time. In the same study, every existing customer who brought in a new customer received a reward of € 25. Given the average difference in customer lifetime value of € 40, this amount implies a Return on Investment (ROI) of roughly 60 % over a six-year period. And this calculation does not even take into account that the total acquisition costs of referred customers are around € 20 lower than those of other customers. Schmitt (2013) further added that having a person close to oneself who is a customer of the same company should increase one's trust in the company and strengthens the emotional bond they have with it. This effect implies that referred customers are less likely to churn than non-referred customers, provided that their referrer does not churn either (which is usually the case for customers who are willing to recommend a product or service).

Conclusion

There are a lot of potentials in counselling in terms of generating income for counsellors and other stakeholder and making impacts in different aspects of human life. However, in order to explore these potentials and generate revenue from the prospects of counselling not just as a helping profession but a source of living, counsellors need to take strategic steps and make critical decisions.

Also, if counsellors will change the narrative of widespread low-income and joblessness in the profession to a high-income and self-sustainability, they need to embrace a total intellectual and professional evolution, and most importantly learn to make use of technology and its devices.

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