

## Massage clients and therapists benefit from product sales

# Succeed at Retailing

by Laura Allen

I often hear from massage therapists that they don't make enough money, and that they're afraid of becoming burned out. Having another stream of income is never a bad thing for anyone, as long as you go about it in the right way. Retail sales is an ethical, potentially lucrative secondary income stream, and there is no reason not to consider adding a retail component to a massage practice.

**T**here are many massage therapists who may already be retailing products in their practice, and many more who may have thought about it, but haven't taken the plunge.

Regarding massage therapists in the haven't-taken-the-plunge camp, why might that be? Some people might hesitate to make any investment in products for fear of losing money; others may feel that sales of any kind raises an ethical issue. Still others who might like to retail may believe they just don't have the space to do so.

Let's break all this down.

### Ethics

It is not unethical to sell something, but it is *always* unethical to tell a client that they *need* anything you are selling, no matter what it is, or how much you think it might be just the thing for them.

I have personally experienced massage therapists on my own social media pages soliciting me to buy something. It was especially disturbing during my husband's serious illness, when people were trying to sell me things they claimed would help him. That is so wrong on so many levels.

It's unethical to make any type of medical claim, or to go outside professional scope of practice through word or deed. Promising people that using frankincense oil is going to cure their cancer, for example, or that drinking a smoothie is going to cause them to lose weight, or that a certain skin care product will make them look years younger, is rampant on

social media—and one can only assume that if a massage therapist is saying such things on his or her Facebook page, he or she is probably saying it to clients in the office.

In the same vein, recruiting clients to be part of a multi-level marketing organization is never a good idea. If they value you as their therapist, they may agree to buy products they don't really want, or invest time or money to keep from hurting your feelings. If they invest money in your weight loss shakes, for example, and fail to lose the weight you've claimed they were going to lose, or fail to make the commissions you said they would make, it could cause ill will and harm your therapeutic relationship.

There is an inherent power differential in our therapeutic relationships, and it's in our favor. You should also always remain aware that when you become a retailer, you are placing yourself in the position of being in a dual relationship with the client. Clients tend to view us as authority figures, so telling someone they *need* the product you're offering is taking unfair advantage of that relationship—and is indeed an ethical violation.

In my own practice of more than a dozen years, where I employed other therapists, my staff members were forbidden to sell anything at all, unless the client said something about it first, such as, "I love this heated neck pillow—do you sell it?"

There are some employment situations where selling is an expected part of the job, and the pressure to sell may be high.

For example, it is a common practice when working at some franchises, spas and cruise lines that you earn commissions for selling retail products, and you may even have a sales quota to meet. I have heard from massage therapists in other employment situations who complained of this, and were uncomfortable with the expectation that they may be expected to sell a product they don't even personally use or believe to be beneficial.

Be sure, when you're seeking a job, to ask if selling is a part of it; and if you feel uncomfortable about that, you may want to look elsewhere.

## Choose well

I learned by trial and error in my own business that the only things I was going to be successful in retailing were the products I actually used with clients during a session, such as the previously mentioned neck pillows, hot-and-cold packs, and topical pain relief products.

Over the years, I allowed people to talk me into investing in other things—handmade jewelry, soaps and other items that usually ended up languishing on the shelves, with the possible exception of around holiday time when someone might be looking for that extra little gift.

When the client has actually experienced a product and benefitted from it or just enjoyed it, they are more apt to

purchase it. That's not to say you *can't* sell your beaded earrings or handmade candles in your space, but it does present a more clinical image, if that's the image you're going for, when you limit yourself to therapeutic products.

## Product display

If your office is large enough to have plenty of space for a display area, great, but even those with limited space can still have a few offerings. Pinterest is a great website for getting display ideas (in fact, I have a board on the Soothing Touch Pinterest page full of them); you don't have to get stuck in the "I'll just get a bookshelf" mode.

If you're a one-room operation, you might use a pretty basket, or a vintage hatbox to display your items. A shabby-chic dresser could be used to store sheets and supplies, and the top can be used as a display area. A corner shelf works for people in small areas. Shelves that are attached to the wall keep things off the floor and don't interfere in your work area when space is tight.

**The smart thing to do is start with small quantities, until you find out how well a product is going to sell.**

## Host events

Hosting a pop-up sale or Ladies' Day was always a popular event in my office. I hosted these types of events once or twice a year with great success. I would invite vendors to set up in the classroom at my office—people with offerings such as handmade items, makeup, purses, clothing, or other things of interest to women.

Refreshments and free chair massage were offered all day, and I took a small percentage of sales or bartered the selling space for some of the goods for personal use or to give as gifts. I would also run a special on gift certificates and package sales during these events, and broke my personal record by selling several thousand dollars' worth of gift certificates in one day during one such event.

## Start small

One thing that is discouraging is getting stuck with a lot of product you don't sell. The smart thing to do is start with small quantities; avoid going overboard buying a lot to start out with, until you find out how well a product is going to sell. Having to deal with three bottles of lotion that didn't sell is better than having to deal with three dozen.

## Educate yourself

If you're going to sell anything, you need to be an expert on it. Be sure you know the shelf life of any products that

are subject to expiration dates—which includes virtually every product that contains water. People don't think of water as being an ingredient that expires, but it does eventually grow bacteria, even when preservatives are added, so be sure not to sell out-of-date product.

### Educate clients

You should be prepared to answer any question about any product you're offering. Never give people a made-up answer—you could end up causing harm. You should know the ingredients in any ingestible product, skin care or cosmetic item you are selling. Many people have nut allergies, and most items that contain any type of nut oil, or that are processed in a facility where nut oils are processed, are of a special concern.

There are also people who have allergies to other ingredients. In almost 20 years of doing massage, I had never heard anyone say they had an allergy to chamomile, and in the past six months alone, I've had six people tell me they have an allergy to it. I recently had a woman ask if the stearic acid in a product was animal or vegetable. She wasn't vegan, but she had a specific allergy to stearic acid derived from animal products.

If you retail any type of product that people are going to ingest or put on their body, then you should always have the safety data sheets from the manufacturer on file so you can give intelligent answers to any questions you may be asked.

### Product liability

You may believe that only the manufacturer is responsible, and that you have no personal liability for selling a product that causes harm, but that's usually not true.

Therapists have to be aware of this, not only for the products they're selling, but also for products they use with clients.

Operating without liability insurance is taking a huge risk. A client in my own practice got a quarter-sized blister from a product a few years ago, and the therapist's liability insurance paid her \$15,000 in damages.

Be aware of product liability if you are making your own products, as some therapists do. It's nearing the holiday season as I am writing this, and I often see massage therapists on social media who are making homemade scrubs or oil blends, either to give as gifts to clients or to sell. Be certain to include a label with the ingredients, and realize that you may be held responsible for any allergic reaction or other harm.

### Happy selling

Retailing can be a great way to supplement your income, but remember that the responsibility is yours to do it ethically. You don't want clients questioning your motives, or ever feeling pressured to buy anything.



Read *"If You're Not Retailing—What's Your Excuse?"* by Laura Allen, at [massagemag.com/retailexcuse](http://massagemag.com/retailexcuse).

Laura Allen is a massage therapist, author, educator, and the Massage Division Director of Soothing Touch ([soothingtouch.com](http://soothingtouch.com)). Her latest book is *Nina McIntosh's The Educated Heart, 4th edition*, published by Lippincott Williams & Wilkins. She resides in Western North Carolina with her husband Champ, also a massage therapist. **M**

## 3 BIG BENEFITS OF RETAILING

**1** Retail results in more income. Retailing products in your office will allow you to generate income for you that is not dependent on being paid specifically for your time without you physically performing a session. If you sell items online through your website, you will make money while you are not even in your office.

**2** Retail creates better customer service. When you make products and supplies available for sale at your clinic, you will provide better customer service.

If a client is in pain or in need of something like a hot pad, analgesic cream or massage tool to get rid of knots in the comfort of his own home, you are providing a great service by making products convenient for your client to purchase directly from you. It is not pushy; you are simplifying your client's life.

When you suggest items that will benefit your clients, they appreciate they don't have to research on their own what product would be best for them. When you teach them how to use the item, they will feel more comfortable using it.

**3** Retail brings in new clients. When you promote the fact that you carry specific items at your location, it actually helps you generate more clients. When potential clients who are looking to buy an item search online and find your website, it will often get them in your door. Once they come in to purchase the product from you, they often decide to set an appointment for your massage service.

—Irene Diamond, R.T.