



Business - Setting the Vision and Tone in the Sole Professional's Practice - What is Tone?

By Dr. Linda Hancock

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Hancock has written a regular weekly column entitled "All Psyched Up" for newspapers in two Canadian provinces for more than a dozen years. Over the years, her readers and clients have said that they have benefited from her common-sense solutions, wisdom, and sense of humour. Dr. Linda Hancock, the author of "Life is An Adventure...every step of the way" and "Open for Business Success" is a Registered Psychologist who has a private practice in Medicine Hat. She can be reached at 403-529-6877 or through email office@drlindahancock.com

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There are many definitions for the word "tone" but, when describing a business it refers to the general atmosphere of a place or situation and the effect that it has on people. People prefer to want to feel comfortable and appreciated so the tone that you set in your business needs to be one that will attract clients.

Let's just use the five senses to describe how good tone can be found in an environment:

SEEING - Even before clients arrive at your doorstep they have started to form an opinion. The neighbourhood where you are located, the condition of the outside of the building and even the other people who are standing in the area affect their impression of you. Consider how you would feel if you went to see a professional and had to walk past piles of garbage that were stacked by the door? Now imagine the difference if you were walking along a walkway bordered by flowers and trimmed shrubs? The cleanliness of your office, colours of the walls and furniture and even the paperwork that you give to the client set the tone for your office. Oh, and don't forget that they will likely be looking at you throughout their appointment. That means that your appearance is also an advertisement for your business. I love to visit my physician. She wears brightly coloured shirts, bold jewellery and always has her hair and makeup done attractively. You don't have to spend a lot of money to look your best - but you will likely earn more when you do!

HEARING - Confidentiality is a very important commitment you make to your clients. That means you need to ensure that the walls of your office are soundproof. If your client can hear sounds coming from outside of your private office, they immediately begin to think that others can hear them also. Playing soft music can not only help to drown out any noises but also tends to help the client relax. I am cautious, however, that I do not play music with lyrics or songs that I know because I tend to start singing or humming. Also, I avoid classical music as it usually has strong variations in volume. One minute you are enjoying the quiet notes and then next - TA TA TA DAH! Besides this it is important that staff words things appropriately so that the client is not upset or shocked. Saying "That's right" is much better than "You told me that three times already".

SMELLING - If we are in a room for an extended period of time we may not be aware of unpleasant smells. Perhaps I have recently heated up my lunch in the microwave and garlic fills the room. Maybe the couple's baby decided to fill his diaper during my last appointment. The smell of smoke which is on the clothing of a staff member can remain strong for some time after the cigarette is extinguished. Not all smells are bad but many individuals are allergic to certain things such as perfume or hair spray. Because of these issues, I always keep a couple of bottles of a light air freshener in my office. Whenever possible, I open the front door and invite nature to enter.

TASTING - Have you ever heard the expression "It gave me a bad taste in my mouth"? Sometimes a person who is upset or angry will use this saying to express the situation. I therefore try to ensure that communication between me and the other person is clear and open. Asking "How does that sound?" and then waiting for an answer allows you to understand the person's perspective. I also encourage clients to be honest with me at all times and then encourage that by calming hearing everything that they have to say so that they know it is a "safe" thing to do. Also, clients often come into a dry room and feel thirsty. They may be on medications that dry their mouths or have been exercising before they arrive. Because of this, I have a small refrigerator in my meeting room and keep it filled with bottled water. It is delivered with my office supplies so I don't need to carry it and the bottles can be recycled. No washing cups or glasses!

FEELING - I am referring to physical touch (not emotions) in this case. Many people have allergies or asthma so it is important to have a clean office without any materials that might be irritating to the skin. I frequently am complimented on the comfortable furniture in my therapy room and am told "This feels like a sitting room" as I have comfortable love seats for seating. Even temperature is

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important for you and the client. A few months ago, our office was having serious problems with the heating system. We were roasting in the winter and cold hang meat in the office during the hottest summer months! When a client feels physically comfortable, he or she will want to return. Also, you need to be careful about if and when you physically touch anyone. Generally speaking, a handshake is acceptable.

The five senses are helpful in assessing the tone of your office. You will also, however, enhance it greatly with a positive and encouraging attitude towards life in general and your client in particular.