



Coaching conversations: finding your niche

The image features three speech bubbles hanging from thin white strings against a teal background. On the left, a vibrant red speech bubble hangs vertically. To its right, a white speech bubble hangs horizontally. Further down and to the right, another white speech bubble hangs horizontally, appearing slightly out of focus. The overall composition is clean and modern, with a focus on communication and dialogue.

In a competitive workplace, it can make sense to identify a coaching niche. But are there also times when it pays to be a generalist? **Sally Brown** asks leading coaches for the lowdown on finding your USP and standing out from the crowd.

The coaches



Dr Graham Wilson works behind the scenes with leaders and other people of power to provide senior executive, business and leadership 'counsel', with a psychodynamic focus. He is also a tutor in coaching practice at Oxford University's Department of Continuing Education.
www.the-confidant.info



Kim Morgan is MD of Barefoot Coaching, which specialises in coach training, and helping organisations develop and implement a coaching culture. On a personal level, she coaches select clients on 'anything and everything', often working with deep-seated beliefs and conditioning.
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There are more coaching training courses than ever before, so more potential competition. Is this the key reason for identifying a niche as a coach or are there other reasons?

Kim Morgan: 'To niche or not to niche seems to have become the question for coaches. The coaching industry has grown at a phenomenal rate, and most marketing experts now agree that identifying a target audience, an ideal client or a niche area for your coaching is a good thing. But I want to say that there is no "should" about nicheing - I know lots of coaches who are "just" coaches and they are happy to coach anyone about any topic. It's fine to be a generalist if that feels comfortable to you, and your marketing communicates that clearly as a deliberate choice. But by finding a niche, you can develop a clear brand and become a recognised expert or thought leader in your field, and that can generate lots of opportunities. Consider the difference between telling someone you meet at a networking event that you are a coach who helps people "reach their potential or overcome barriers to success", with saying you "work with women who have moved into their first leadership role in an organisation to develop their personal gravitas, communication and presentation skills, and emotional self-management". Which one is more likely to get you a referral?'

Graham Wilson: 'Competition is not the key reason for developing your USP (unique selling point) as a coach. But you do need to differentiate yourself to be visible, so that the right clients can find you. It's also about identifying what is of value to your clients - so a former teacher could say they are "an expert in helping people learning new skills"'

Eve Menezes Cunningham: 'For me, finding my niche was about being authentic. I used to feel ashamed for not being 'dynamic' enough (think Tony Robbins) as a coach. Therapeutic coaching for the mind, body, heart and soul is much more congruent for me. If someone's seen my website and been drawn to my approach, we have a head start when it comes to working together.'

Rebecca Hourston: 'A lot of coaches don't like to talk about competition. We talk about abundance and there being space for everyone. But buyers have to make choices and, certainly in the corporate world, standing out from the crowd is important these days. I use the analogy of a bookshop - I was in one recently looking for a holiday read and there were so many hundreds of books on the shelves, I felt overwhelmed. But then there were three books that had been picked out and put on a display table on their own and that's what I was drawn to. You can be a brilliant coach, just like a great book, but if you are lost among hundreds, you won't get found.'

What's the difference between a niche and a USP?

Graham Wilson: 'There are a certain, limited number of niches (such as executive, sports, financial, health, life), and you still need to have a USP within a niche. Saying you are a "business coach" is not enough - which part of the business infrastructure are you working with? The needs of a start-up are different from those of a small-to-medium enterprise (SME) or a CEO. Saying you are an executive coach who specialises in the financial sector is better, but it's still not a USP. But saying you are an executive coach with an MBA who specialises

in G-corridor coaching within the financial sector is closer to a USP. A USP also helps you isolate clients that you don't want to work with. It's better to carve yourself a USP within a niche even if it's tough to get clients at first, rather than taking on any client who comes your way.'

Rebecca Hourston: 'I think of a USP as having "stalkability" - could someone find you, and what would they find out about you if they looked? What articles would come up? What does your website tell them about your credibility? Even if there were only 10 other coaches in the world, you should have a USP, for three good reasons: clarity, sanity and balance. If you don't have a USP, you are saying, "I will coach everyone on everything". A USP gives you boundaries - it's not just about who you are for, it's also about who you are not for.'

Manjula Bray: 'As coaches, we can be reluctant to sell ourselves, and having a USP can imply that you are selling. But it's really just about communicating what you do, so the right people can find you. Once you have pinned down your USP, you can begin to think of yourself as a brand, which means saying no to work that doesn't reflect your USP. Many coaches find they need an alternative source of income, so find it difficult to say no to work that doesn't align with their USP when they first start out.'

What mistakes do therapists-turned-coaches make when starting out? Why is being a dual-trained practitioner not enough of a USP?

Graham Wilson: 'Thinking that it is enough to say that they are a dual-trained practitioner, and not identifying a client group. It's what I call



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Eve Menezes Cunningham, Chair of BACP Coaching, specialises in holistic self-care and is the author of *365 Ways to Feel Better: Self-care Ideas for Embodied Wellbeing* (White Owl, 2017).

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"brass plate" syndrome - the thinking that, "if I put a brass plate up outside my door, people will come to me". But they won't. It comes back to not thinking about how to make yourself visible within your niche. It can be done by all sorts of means, but being passive isn't one of them. You need to identify who you want to be visible to. Saying you are a "dual-trained practitioner" is effectively saying, "I work with people who are looking for both a coach and a therapist". People may be thinking of getting a coach and not be aware that they need a therapist, or not be prepared to work with a therapist. The niche is about the clients, not about you. And simply saying you are a dual-trained practitioner doesn't identify your clients.'

Kim Morgan: 'My experience is that my therapeutic training is a bonus for clients, but it's not the reason they choose me. So much of marketing and communication these days is done via social media, through blogs and articles. If you don't identify who you want to work with, you won't be able to target your communication effectively.'

Is it always essential to look to your existing skills and experience to inform your USP?

Graham Wilson: 'No, it's not essential, but it may be more reflective of your values or a consequence of your values, the most obvious one being your political leanings; personally, I'm left-leaning and work as an executive coach to people in the political sector. Some business coaches will say, "I have an MBA" but not all clients feel an MBA is relevant to their issues, so you may be putting something in the way of potential clients. MBAs are geared towards large

public limited companies (PLCs), so if you want to work with the small enterprise sector, an MBA would not be the way to go.'

Eve Menezes Cunningham: 'While I've trained in a wide range of modalities, others find their expertise comes from their pre-coaching/therapeutic background, eg working with leaders, corporates, NHS, teachers, parents or whatever it might be for you.'

Rebecca Hourston: 'The more you work in one sector, the more knowledgeable you become. As coaches we don't like to say we are experts, but remember our clients and prospects do have an expectation that we will have a level of expertise and you need to own what you've got.'

Kim Morgan: 'Identifying your niche will be determined to a certain extent by your credibility in the eyes of who will be buying your coaching services. I am fascinated by sports people but I have never been one, known one personally or worked with one, so it's fair to say I don't know what their daily experience is or what they need to reach peak performance. I could still coach them, but they would know within a few seconds of meeting me that I didn't have any sporting expertise. In coaching and particularly in the early stages when you are winning clients, credibility really matters.'

If you're just starting out as a coach and are struggling to identify a niche, are there any thinking processes that can help (or should you just sign up for some coaching yourself)?

Graham Wilson: 'Employing a coach can help you work through your USP. Drawing on →



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reflective practice is also valuable, to see what kinds of work you find the most resonance with. You also need to think about what kind of clients you want to work with, and what kind of lifestyle you want around it - that will impact the shape or style of coaching you do. A course may help - the Advanced Coaching course at Oxford University is aimed at helping experienced coaches identify and market their USP (www.conted.ox.ac.uk/courses/advanced-coaching/).

Rebecca Hourston: 'Ask yourself, what do you love? Who do you most enjoy working with? It's not about demographics - it's about identifying a shared problem. It can seem like your clients are random, but is there a commonality there that you have missed? They might all be dealing with career transitions, for instance. Sometimes other people can see our USP better than we can - if you have colleagues you trust, ask them what they think your USP is. But it's also important to think about what you want to earn from your coaching practice. Can the people you want to work with afford to pay what you need to earn a living? If you are still struggling, I think it's fine to experiment with a few niches, and see how you like them.'

Manjula Bray: 'Find a way that you are comfortable with to ask clients for feedback: they have direct experience of your strengths. I developed a feedback form using SurveyMonkey which allows the client to remain anonymous. I am also a big fan of psychometric profiling, such as a strengths survey, which can give you an idea of what you may be suited to.'

Kim Morgan: 'Ask yourself, which clients do you feel most comfortable working with, and which clients make you feel more uncomfortable or trigger your own impostor syndrome? Which clients do you most look forward to seeing? Which clients have had enormous value from working with you? If they have given you testimonials, what have they said about you? But don't hurry the process - a niche is not something to be plucked off a shelf, forced or manufactured. It should align with you and where you can genuinely add value to others. The best niches arise from a coming together of

your experiences and history, your passions and values and a need in the market. If it is not yet clear to you, give it time and it will emerge. In the meantime, keep coaching as many people as you can in as many different circumstances.'

How do you ensure that your USP evolves if necessary and doesn't become outdated?

Graham Wilson: 'Your interests change, you develop skills, your life changes, so your USP or the way you work can shift. I used to go into London five days a week to see clients, then I dropped to two days a week and now I do a lot of client work by phone or we meet locally and I only occasionally go into London.'

Rebecca Hourston: 'Your niche is often your "mirror you", so if you change, your niche may also evolve. Your USP can change as you become experienced - I started working mainly with women but now I also work with male leaders who want to change the gender balance in their teams. I think it's not unusual to grow out of a niche - one successful coach I know started out coaching solopreneurs in starting their own businesses, but is now a relationship coach.'

Kim Morgan: 'Your life story will change over time and your ability to be an effective coach within a particular sector will change as a result. For example, I had a significant bereavement a few years ago, and since then, I have trained as a bereavement recovery coach and added that to my coaching offering as I had insight into the needs of this particular group of clients, and also experienced what was missing for them in terms of support.'

How did you identify your personal niche and what impact did it have on your business?

Graham Wilson: 'I used to call myself an executive coach until I found myself driving up the M40 behind one, called Wallace Arnold. I decided to ask my clients what I do that's different and they said, "You are my confidant, not my coach", so that's what I became. It made



me approach groups of people who may not have thought that they needed a coach but do have need of a confidant. When I introduce myself as a confidant, people say "I want to know more about that," but they never said that when I introduced myself as a coach. Being a French term, it also aligns well with my Euro-centric values.'

Eve Menezes Cunningham: 'Writing my book helped me consolidate my niche. I started coaching in my 20s and my niche has evolved into self-care for the mind, body, heart and soul. Crystal therapy training led to my coach training. I developed crystal coaching for my final project as a way of helping clients use stones as visual and kinaesthetic anchors for their goals, tapping into their intuition and transpersonal elements. I added neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), emotional freedom technique (EFT), psychosynthesis counselling, yoga, mindfulness, therapeutic coaching and integrative clinical supervision. Self-care for the mind, body, heart and soul brings it all together.'

Rebecca Hourston: 'I had my own coaching business, Move Mountains, for 12 years and "faffed" a lot of the time without a niche. But then I started doing some associate work for a company called Aspire, working with women leaders, which I loved. I then began to work with working parents, helping them to find a way to work flexibly, and suddenly it became easy to create a website, write an ebook and articles and accept speaking engagements. It gave me huge clarity. I knew I had found my niche because I enjoyed the work.'

Manjula Bray: 'My niche found me. I am an executive leadership coach with a background in human resources and business psychology, doing associate work in large companies. I had also sat on the Law Society selection committee for candidates with the Judicial Appointments Commission for five years. The judiciary needs to reflect greater diversity, with more black and minority ethnic (BAME) candidates. Only a small proportion of BAME candidates who applied were ultimately selected. I developed a one-day workshop for the Law Society, exposing

people to the process of competency-based selection, which many people in the legal field had never experienced before. People at the workshops started approaching me for one-on-one coaching, on their presentation skills, or their CV, and suddenly I had a very specific USP. I had something unique to offer within my niche - I had several years' experience of sitting on the selection committee so have first-hand knowledge of how the process works. My ethnicity inherently contributes to my "face validity" and my USP.'

Kim Morgan: 'Personally, I consider myself a generalist as a coach. When I started coaching 25 years ago, you didn't need a niche. As a counsellor, I had worked with women's development and assertiveness so it made sense to coach in that area, but I never did that exclusively, I was always a generalist and I still am. However, as the owner of a coaching business, we have a specific niche. We only offer coaching and coaching-related activities and do not stray outside our field of expertise, even into closely related areas. People come to us because they know we are specialists in coaching.' ■

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To explore the best niche for you, join BACP Coaching's one-day CPD event in London, 22 January 2018: Coaching specific client groups, identifying your niche and marketing your offer effectively. To book, see www.bacp.co.uk/events/

