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Massaging game plan vital for new service  
Athlete-therapist's hustle eases start-up  
headaches

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As a basketball standout at Shelby County High School and Eastern Kentucky University, Dwayne Crittendon learned lessons on the court that are now playing out in the business world.

"It's hard work," whether you're hustling down court on defense or putting in another seven-day week on the job, he said. "You've got to be strong willed" and "always put forth a consistent effort." And when opportunity bounces your way, "you've got to try to grab that ball."

Crittendon, a licensed massage therapist, hopes to score with his new business, DSC Active Healing Massage. The Louisville office opened in December, with a special aim at attracting athletes, along with others seeking to reduce muscle tension and stress, relieve spasms, increase flexibility or take advantage of other benefits promised by the treatments.

The field seemed a natural fit, Crittendon said, after his college days playing at Vincennes University and then at ECU in the late 1980s and early '90s. He had seen firsthand the benefits of massage.

"I got back on the court quicker. It strengthened my muscles more. I was more flexible. It really just helped me out," said Crittendon, 33. After graduating from a massage-therapy school in 2005, he began work at Fern Creek Chiropractic, where he continues to provide service.

He also takes his therapy on the road for sessions at Humana offices, and Crittendon also hopes to provide in-school services to teachers during their planning times.

One of his first clients at the new business was Linda Johnson, who moved to Louisville from Columbia, Mo., in December. "I have a sciatic nerve problem," said Johnson, whose lower back muscles "get really tight at times. I find that the massages help to loosen them up."

In the past, Johnson said, she had needed treatments every week. With Crittendon, she said, massage benefits last twice as long. "He's very good."

Johnson also appreciates the \$49 monthly membership plan that Crittendon offers, which includes one hourlong massage and unlimited additional sessions at \$29 each. "It was very attractive. It was affordable to me," she said.

The business needed a distinctive attraction such as the membership plan to set it apart in a crowded field of therapeutic massage, said Crittendon's wife, Julia Crittendon, who handles marketing and promotions for the business.

"The competition is great out there," she said. "For us to get where we want to be at, then we have to kind of go and think outside the box, versus what everyone else is doing."

Catering to athletes is another way to carve out a niche, Dwayne Crittendon said -- and with his background, he knows what those clients need. Athletes typically want a fast-paced "sports massage," rather than the slower, more relaxing session that other clients may prefer.

Troy Killian, director of operations for the Louisville Sports Commission, won a year of massages in a promotional contest that DSC Active Healing sponsored in December.

"I'm a runner -- not a very good one, but I do do it for exercise," said Killian, 30. The running causes "a lot of lower back strain and hamstring problems," and he also suffers from tension in his neck and his upper back. "So going in and getting massages helps that out quite a bit."

Killian also appreciates that "Dwayne doesn't talk to you" during the sessions, unless you ask a question. Some others in the business are too chatty to suit Killian. "I'm there to get worked on and relax, not to have a conversation."



Crittendon said his size -- 6 feet, 7 inches tall and 250 pounds -- was an asset on the basketball court. But with some clients it can be a drawback. "I kind of intimidate people a little bit, I think," he said.

The solution is "just talk to them," he said. "I think once they talk to me and meet me ... it kind of puts their mind at ease."

Crittendon tells clients: "This is strictly professional. This is for you. It's for me to help your body heal. That's where you try to gain their trust and just try to educate them on what's going on."

Another obstacle is the reluctance many men feel about receiving a massage -- especially from another man.

When Julia Crittendon tells potential clients about the business, "the women really don't have a problem" with the idea, she said.

But men? "I can tell you that 90 percent of my responses have been, 'Oh, no, all I deal with is women.' 'Oh, no, I don't want a man touching on me,'" she said.

That reluctance is especially common among fellow African Americans, she said. About 85 percent of the business's clients are white. "I don't know what it is, but it is hard marketing to our own race."

For male athletes, the idea of a massage from another man shouldn't be shocking, Killian said. "In college, I had trainers working on me. ... Dwayne's very professional about it. That also helped the comfort level."

The Crittendons have started small. Their rental space in the Goldsmith Office Center is a converted storage area. Friends and family helped with the decor.

Julia Crittendon, who also works as an analyst at Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield, designed the business cards and Web site.

"We didn't have a huge start-up cost," she said. "I think that's something that new business owners need to look at, and not just go gung-ho on getting everything" done professionally.