

## Creating Your Niche

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Yoga for Depression. Yoga and Chocolate. Yoga for Golf. With such titles littering the schedules of studios and retreat centers, it doesn't require marketing genius to notice that sub-specializations are a rising trend in yoga.

"With the huge wave of teacher trainings, many practitioners are now teachers who want to live and breathe yoga. They want to make their passion their work. The natural outgrowth is for each of us to ask ourselves, 'What do I have that I can offer?' rather than just replicating what is already out there," says Traci Childress, yoga teacher and program coordinator at the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York. The resulting specialization can take one of many forms, from focus on a therapeutic application of yoga to concentrating on an element of the practice. It can integrate yoga with elements of Western culture or address a single demographic.

True to the nature of yoga, these relevant but varied interpretations have always existed. What is new is the diversity in yoga's positioning in the world. This raises philosophical questions and invites self-inquiry. Is specialization a simply a marketing tactic? Is it outreach serving the growth of yoga and the students? Does it bastardize the practice? Is specialization economically beneficial? Exactly when do we know we are qualified to be the expert?

### Passion Becomes You

Amy Weintraub's work with depression is remarkable: Open the pages of leading retreat centers, and it's likely Weintraub will be on the schedule. From the student-oriented "Breathe to Beat the Blues" to the practitioner-centric "Yoga for Depression," her work encompasses classes, a CD, workshops, articles, a book, and multiple teacher trainings.

This niche is a marketing no-brainer. The sheer volume of advertising for antidepressants alone attests to the value of serving this population. After all, companies wouldn't clamor to capture the market without a profit motive. But Amy's motivation had nothing to do with economics, and everything to do with her life. "Prior to 1992, I was a depressed journalist with seven

unsuccessful novels to my credit,” she explains. “With yoga, I found new life.”

Her journey began with teacher training at Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in Lenox, Massachusetts. Convinced the training had helped her own fog to lift, she deepened her skills by studying internationally with various masters in Pranayama, kriya, and nada yoga. “It never occurred to me that I was doing something different,” she says. “Specializing in this was just me being me.” Compelled to share her findings, she penned “Yoga: The New Prozac” for *Yoga Journal*. From that initial article, the first workshop was born.

Over the past 15 years, she has evolved ways to use yoga as a source of relief, both for those experiencing depression and for those teachers who serve them. Her work has benefited yoga as well, as is evidenced by the volume of laudatory articles featuring her in both the yoga and the mainstream press. Now when Weintraub speaks at professional seminars, psychotherapists and other health workers actually earn CEUs for attending. “In the ’70s and ’80s I was a consumer of mental health services, and now I am considered a leader in the field,” she says.

#### East Meets West

Even when driven by passion, the niche offering might not always be universally well received. Such has been the experience of David Romanelli. Eight years ago, while he was working for an agent representing Shaquille O’Neal, a friend urged him to try yoga. He did, and fell in love. “From that first class, I felt driven to get yoga to as many people as I possibly could,” he muses. He left his job, abandoned L.A., and started At One Yoga, now a leading studio in Phoenix.

Beyond his contribution to Arizona’s yoga landscape, Romanelli has drawn attention for his workshop topics, including Yoga and Chocolate, and Yoga and Wine. Fascinated by trends within pop culture, he explains, “I honor people where they are by wrapping yoga in different sensibilities and language so people can relate to it. My passion is how relevant and integrated yoga can be with peoples’ lives.”

The pop-culture allure of Romanelli’s workshops has won him the spot as mind/body expert on Yahoo! Health. In addition, he has appeared in *The New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune*, in *O Magazine*, and on CBS News. Not surprisingly, controversy has followed. “Despite great press coverage and attracting newcomers to yoga, the criticism can be vicious,” he says.

Romanelli feels critics overlook the fact that he integrates popular cultural elements with yoga to reveal the sacred. Yoga and Chocolate emphasizes the ancient symbolism of the cocoa bean, examines the chemical and sensate impact

upon the body, and pays respect to the modern-day mystique. In *Yoga and Wine*, “we support deeper meaning in celebration, including raising the glass in a sacred, ritualistic way. We also explore wine as a metaphor for how to view aging.” With *Yoga and Country Music* next on his agenda, Romanelli will emphasize the mystical aspects of Christianity in country music and underscore yoga’s traditional values to integrate and reveal the philosophical consistencies between the two. To him, this work is yoga. “I want to show people that yoga is completely accessible and makes sense no matter who you are,” he explains.

#### Profiting and Proliferating

You don’t have to have an MBA to be smart about your business. In both her teaching and her business management, Ann Dyer draws from her 20-year career as a vocalist. She integrated music into her classes from the moment she started [teaching yoga](#), eight years ago. Now a national presenter in nada yoga, her work has flourished and includes retreats, workshops, classes, and conventions. Next she will launch a “workshop-in-a-box” something to take home to keep the practice alive.”

A savvy businesswoman, her advice is clear. “Think of yourself as content. What are the avenues through which you can distribute yourself? DVDs, conferences, retreats, recordings, essays, journalistic publishing, workshops, classes, public speaking, posters—what are the many forms? Each has strengths and weaknesses. Construct a life in which one supports the other. Take a look to ensure that the pieces make sense in terms of your life as a teacher and in terms of the experience of the students.”

Often the roots of regular teaching remain. Many specialists continue “regular” classes to complement their big picture. “When someone takes my *Yoga for Singles* retreat, they deepen their relationship with themselves, and then they’re off to live their lives,” comments Debi DiPeso, owner of Bliss Yoga Center in Woodstock, New York. “Teaching regular classes, I see many students every week, often for many years. The evolution possible with weekly contact is rewarding in a really different way.”

It makes business sense as well. Economically, it provides a steady income flow while serving as a great platform for recruitment of participants in your niche offering. Weekly classes are also a laboratory for new ideas and allow for refinement of skills in the art of teaching itself.

#### Ready, Set, Go

Creating a niche is a passion-driven process, evolving from the study of multiple related topics and their synthesis into something new. Reflecting with gratitude upon her path of intensive study with Indian voice masters, mantra masters, kirtan leaders, and western vocalists, Ann Dyer says, “Eventually, like all really great teachers, we have to take on the task of becoming who we are,

to allow that to unfold, rather than mimicking our mentors.” In a tradition that alternately champions transmission from a teacher and affirms the wisdom of each individual, it can be intimidating to give yourself permission to step forward as a niche “expert.” [Meditation](#) teacher Sally Kempton offers the following self-inquiry for such situations.

1. **Do I have the *adhikara* (authority) to teach this?**

This refers to the technical knowledge to skillfully address the potential needs of your students. It indicates your foundational understanding of and commitment to yoga and asks if your intention, scope of study, and knowledge in the niche confers authority.

2. **What is appropriate in this circumstance and for these students?**

Teaching is a dance between the knowledge of the teacher and the readiness of the student. Challenge your niche to best serve the needs of the student. For example, though Yoga for Singles could have been yoga speed-dating, DiPeso used it as an opportunity to explore a deeper concept: each student’s relationship with him- or herself.

3. **Will sharing my knowledge in this context be emotionally satisfying to me?**

Choosing our teaching environments wisely is less a function of the wallet than a function of the heart. The most glaring need for yoga is not worth addressing if it does not awaken *shakti* (power) within the teacher; the outcome will be disappointing for all involved.

#### Be Careful What You Niche

Paul Toliuszis, co-owner of Miami Yoga Shala, has been on both sides of the equation. Within a year of becoming a full-time teacher, he combined his passions by using yoga to enhance his golf performance. A pioneer of vinyasa in south Florida through his classes and teacher trainings, he built a very successful franchise in Yoga for Golf between 1998 and 2004. It included retreats, work with recognized golf professionals, and several highly profitable *Yoga for Golf* videos.

Grateful for the learning and success, Toliuszis no longer wants to be identified with only one population. “For new teachers, specialization can be good. It can really help to find a niche. But now I want to serve everyone.” Benefits aside, he counsels that niche associations can be hard to shake. When he recently pitched himself to the director of scheduling for a retreat center, he was greeted with, “Oh, you’re the *Yoga for Golf* guy.” Only time and new positioning will change that perception.

## Your Bottom Line

Let passion determine whether you create a niche, and let study feed your evolution. Just as rushing a pose can result in injury, the heartache of rushing your evolutionary process is avoidable. Resist any urgency to distinguish yourself in what seems like a crowded market. Your teaching is a work of self-expression in progress. In the words of Omega's Traci Childress, "When teachers meld yoga with their vision for social change, the result creates momentum for transformation in the world. The world needs this kind of engaged practice!"

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