

BY APRIL DURRETT

Building Business Through Referrals

Joe Stankowski enjoys seeing the fitness bug spread among his clients' friends and families.

SUBJECT: Joe Stankowski
BUSINESS: Absolute Fitness Personal Training, Wilmington, Delaware

His Clientele. Stankowski specializes in in-home training for women in their 30s–50s who have been cleared for exercise. He also works with pageant contestants. He just finished 2 years as official trainer for the Miss Delaware USA® pageant and is now a consultant for the Mrs. Delaware and Mrs. Maryland Globe pageants. “My training has improved the contestants’ self-confidence and the way they carry themselves,” he says. “This niche actually found me. I was referred by a client to the pageant world, and it’s been great for my career. I donate my time in exchange for the publicity. Many pageant contestants have talked about their training to the media, and I’ve gained credibility through my work with them. This position makes me unique and puts me in front of my target market—women.”

Making a Difference. When Stankowski moved to Delaware after living for a while in England, he heard about the Lieutenant Governor’s Challenge that aimed to help people make physical activity a regular part of their days. He talked to staff in the Lieutenant Governor’s office and shared how he, as a professional personal trainer, could offer different insights from those of the many academic representatives involved. He served on the steering committee and brainstormed ways to promote active living to Delaware citizens, especially the sedentary population.

New Clients by Referrals Only. Stankowski has done so well with his personal training business that he’s not actively seeking new clients. He takes them only

by referral. “If someone is referred by a current client, the prospective client already knows the results she can get and the way I work. She will be a good client for me.”

The Power of Referrals. Stankowski is constantly amazed by the success he’s had with referrals. “For example, I decided I wanted to train people who lived in upscale apartment buildings,” he says. “I mentioned this desire to a client. She called me back within a day and said she had heard of a potential opportunity for me! Now I’m the in-house fitness professional and preferred trainer at The Residences at Rodney Square. Every time I ask for a referral I usually get a payback within 2 or 3 weeks.” (In fact, he has become so skilled at getting referrals that he’s created the “Ultimate Referral Kit for Fitness Professionals” with colleagues Jim Labadie and Todd Scott.)

Fine-Tuning His Business Strategy. Stankowski is currently working to pinpoint the next step in his career. He knows he wants to help more people understand the benefits of fitness but doesn’t know exactly how he wants to achieve that goal. “I heard about a business coach through a few trainers I know. They got impressive results from working with her, so I decided to invest in myself and hire her to help me gain clarity on my future vision.”

A Cooperative Spirit. One of his biggest challenges is finding complementary business owners who are willing to cooperate in order to give their mutual customers a better experience. He also likes cooperating with other trainers. “There are plenty of clients for all trainers. I think we can work together to educate people about the importance of fitness and increase our market. Competition? I see leisure activities that take time as my competition, rather than other trainers.”

Why He Loves His Work. “I love being able to take something technical like exercise and make it simple and understandable for people. I love when my

clients get results. For example, one client I had was afraid to walk up and down stairs without holding onto the rail. After training with me, she was confident enough to run up and down the stairs holding bags. She had improved her agility, stability and mobility and was more confident. I also like seeing when clients’ improved fitness ends up inspiring their friends and family.”

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