

Happy Members + Happy Trainers = Profits

INSPIRE STAFF AND CLIENTS ALIKE THROUGH INNOVATIVE IN-HOUSE EDUCATION PROGRAMS.

By Scott McLain, MA

Don't we all want to manage profitable facilities and personal fitness training programs? You bet we do!

Shepherding your members through a systematic membership integration process is critical to client retention, as discussed in the January issue of *IDEA Fitness Manager*, but it is only the beginning. It is equally important to attract and retain the best and brightest trainers you can find. One way to do this is to extend continuing education opportunities to your staff by developing an innovative in-house education program. Not only will these chief objectives increase your facility's retention rates (happy members); they will also drive more members into your personal fitness program (happy trainers). Simply put, happy members plus happy trainers equal profits!

Create a Seminar & Workshop Series

Put yourself into a new exerciser's shoes for a moment. Exercise is completely foreign, the equipment is intimidating, and you are surrounded by fit people. To top this off, you have been bombarded for years by conflicting information or misinformation from the media. Now you are aimlessly standing in the new club you joined, not knowing where to begin. If a fitness professional fails to step up to help, it's not hard to see why some new members might not be happy with their club experience. Many new members quit because they feel like a fish out of water. But the outlook needn't be so bleak. This reality actually creates an enormous opportunity for your organization. By creating an annual

Seminar and Workshop Series and then leveraging the credibility captured during the facilitation, you can both drive your personal fitness training (PFT) revenues and develop educated and happy members.

Happy Members: Steps to a Successful Seminar Series

Implementing your club's annual seminar series is an easy and economical way to educate your members while affording your personal trainers a fantastic opportunity to indirectly sell themselves. Consider these five points when starting your club's series:

1. Develop a Series Calendar. Divide your annual calendar into four seasonal series. This allows you to break the work involved into manageable pieces. It also allows you to introduce topics pertinent to that time of year. For example, the Winter Series might include a "Holiday Eating" seminar while the Spring Series may be more appropriate for a "Get Ready for Golf" workshop.

2. Create a Topic List. Consider three factors when developing your list of topics. First, pick a few subjects that can recur frequently during all four seasons. For example, a "LIFT" (Ladies In Free Weight Training) seminar is a great way to integrate female members into the weight room year-round. Second, pick one topic each season that is facilitated by an outside professional such as a locally known nutritionist or doctor. This is a great way to develop a referral base because it allows you to build credibility with your members *and* with the facilitator. Finally, choose a slate of topics divided between lecture and workshop formats. The lecture format is great for

general educational topics like "Fitness 101," while the workshop format is more appropriate for "in the gym" hands-on topics such as "10 Essential Fit Ball Exercises."

3. Pick the Best Facilitators for Each Topic. Choose locally recognized and credible facilitators for your outside speakers and choose wisely when picking in-house facilitators. Give trainers with a specific expertise and good speaking skills the opportunity to present on their specialty area. Do you have a trainer who specializes in dry-land ski conditioning? Have her give a workshop in September just when recreational skiers are beginning their conditioning for the winter. Better yet, use the seminar to "kick off" a "6-Week Ski Conditioning Camp" at your facility!

4. Leverage Credibility Gained Into Personal Training Profits. Now that you have educated your members on the topic at hand, it's time to leverage the credibility and enthusiasm you've built into profits. At Westerville Athletic Club (WAC) we use the seminar series to promote training in two ways. First, this is a good opportunity to capture any members who slipped through the cracks during the initial attempt to register them for their evaluation and session with a trainer. We double-check to ensure that seminar participants have completed or are registered for their NewFit program. Second, as mentioned in the ski clinic example, we use the seminars and workshops to register participants in any upcoming fee-based clinics. WAC trainer Chip Bruchac registered 22 of 31 attendees from his "Triathlon Training Seminar" into his 6-week "Triathlon Training Clinic." Chip was able to leverage a 1-hour seminar into \$3,278 revenue. Better yet, all 22 participants finished their first triathlon. That's 22 happy members!

5. Construct a Marketing Plan. Promoting these seminars is a snap. First, have an area in your facility where you post the seasonal schedule. Display this schedule 30 days prior to the season. Each seminar should have its own flier and sign. The fliers should be out 2 weeks prior to the seminar and the sign 1 week prior. Avoid putting the materials out too early. If materials are out too far in advance, members do not feel a sense of urgency and tend to forget to

register. Be sure to open your series to nonmembers—this can create new member-recruiting opportunities! Place fliers at area businesses such as coffee shops, nutrition stores, churches, etc.

Happy Trainers: In-house Continuing Education

Having trouble finding the trainer with a master's degree, five certifications and a stable of clients? Stop trying! Typically the more experienced and talented trainers fly solo. Instead, find personable and competent trainers with a passion for fitness and a thirst for knowledge. These individuals are easier to find and manage. Best of all, you can develop them into the next generation of top-notch trainers through your in-house continuing education program.

Prerequisites

What credentials should your trainers possess? This is a hot topic in certification circles these days. Since there is no governmental regulation, anyone who passes a weekend certificate course can hang up a personal training shingle. Many in the industry (myself included) believe this has to change. Until an industry-wide standard is set, here is a list of the prerequisites we recommend for our trainers at WAC:

1. a degree in an exercise-related field or a certification from an organization that has gained or is pending accreditation with the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA), which is the accrediting body of the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA).

2. a passion for fitness and a passion for sharing it with others

3. a thirst for knowledge beyond certification

4. a team player

Create a Farm System

I like to compare developing trainers

through an in-house continuing education program to the “farm system” used in professional baseball. Sure, occasionally a team like the Cleveland Indians signs the “Big Time” player, but he isn't their bread and butter. Good teams develop their organizations by developing raw talent. They look for passionate players that have the basics skills (prerequisites) down pat. Through their farm system, they develop that raw talent into “Big League” material. Just as the successful implementation of the farm system is critical to the success of Major League Baseball teams, the development of your trainers is vital to your club's success. That begins with the commitment to continually educate your trainers.

Personal Development Account

Unquestionably, the easiest and most “hands-off” way to develop a “culture of knowledge” at your facility is to implement a Personal Development Account (PDA). PDAs are funds that a trainer accumulates that can be used for CECs. At WAC, where I am the fitness manager, all trainers receive an amount equal to 3% of their prior year's sales for their PDA. This amount is capped at \$1,500. My trainers have used these funds for certification fees, videos, books, professional membership annual fees and college courses and for attending IDEA conferences and local workshops. The PDA funds must be used for opportunities that lead to CEC credits and must be preapproved by me. Here's a funny story. I've denied a PDA request only once: Several years ago, a trainer wanted to use her funds to take a course on “How to Start Your Own Training Business”!

The implementation of a PDA need not require any up-front cost on the facility's part. The funds are simply factored in as a part of the trainer's compensation. So if you want to pay your trainers \$25/session, pay them \$24 and

offer the PDA. One rule to note, however; never take money out of your trainers' pockets. Instead of reducing their rates to offer the account, wait until the next fee increase to factor in the PDA.

In-House Education Opportunities

Implementing an in-house continuing education program doesn't need to be complex. In fact, it's simple and inexpensive to facilitate. First, attach a continuing education presentation after each monthly staff meeting. Second, choose any topic that is relevant or an area your team needs to strengthen, and dedicate 30 minutes in the gym to that topic. I have found that my trainers like “hands on” in the gym formats. You can take your sessions to the next level by putting together a packet of information including objectives, an outline and a quiz. Your seminars can even be approved for CEC units by various certifying bodies.

One Step at a Time

Keeping members happy should be our number-one concern if we want to retain them. In our industry, keeping customers from walking out the door is key to our success. The first step is getting them involved immediately, using the four-step membership integration process. The second is creating happy members and happy trainers through educational opportunities for both. In the next issue, we will address how to boost personal training revenue by leveraging the economies of scale.

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