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What can personal trainers do to generate client referrals from the medical community?

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There are many factors involved in generating referrals from medical professionals. As a physical therapist and a personal fitness trainer, I have had the opportunity to view this issue from both sides.

The most important consideration for a personal trainer is being prepared to demonstrate that you are worthy of taking over the care of a medical professional's patient. From a physical therapist's perspective, I have to be absolutely certain that I am putting my patient in the hands of an individual who has at least a basic knowledge of exercise contraindications for a specific patient population. Depending on the patient's diagnosis, the person may have been in therapy for weeks, months and, in some cases, years. With that in mind, you can understand why a medical professional may be very hesitant to release a patient to someone who cannot demonstrate a through understanding of the patient's specific needs.

How does one instill this confidence into a medical professional? As a personal trainer, you must be willing to sacrifice the time and money required to educate yourself beyond the basic certification level. There are many postrehabilitation certifications now available that will give you a basis from which to build a foundation for training special populations.

Once you have obtained your postrehab certification, you are still not truly prepared to begin training indi-

viduals who require special exercise prescription secondary to physical limitations. Just as a medical, nursing or physical therapy student is not ready to begin treating patients after completing the academic portion of training, you too will not be ready to safely and confidently handle special client populations right away. To gain experience, commit yourself to working with an experienced postrehab fitness instructor or qualified medical professional to observe firsthand all that

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you have studied in obtaining your postrehab certification.

One great way to gain experience working with patients and potential future clients is by contacting physical therapy businesses in your area and inquiring whether volunteer programs are available. After detailing your credentials, ask if it's possible to speak to the supervising physical therapist of the facility. You will have to volunteer your time, of course, but the experience gained will be well worth the investment.

After completing the steps outlined here, you will be ready to begin your marketing campaign aimed toward the medical community. Not only will you

feel more confident in your postrehab training skills, but so will your clients and, ultimately, your referral sources.

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When my husband and I first started our personal training business, we had a rough time getting area physicians to even sign a medical form, let alone actually refer clients to us. It seems that "personal trainer" has a negative effect in the medical community, so we took a different approach. We were having tremendous results with clients, insofar as them losing

weight, becoming more fit, decreasing or eliminating the need for medication, improving function, and so forth. So we decided to start sending regular client progress notes to their physicians and asking for input. We also had clients go in for their annual physicals and when the doctors saw the changes—weight loss, improved blood work, increased cardio capacity, decreased blood pressure, and so forth—they started calling us and referring patients to us. Yes, doctors call *us!*

We have now added to our services to include postrehab and medically supervised exercise. (In addition to our personal trainer certifications, I'm an NAAHFRP medical exercise specialist

—as is our business partner, Maryann Jackson—and my husband is an NAAHFRP conditioning specialist.) Our youngest client is 13 years old and our oldest is nearing 100.

We decided on the senior and medically supervised market for two reasons: First, we have a passion for helping people adopt lifestyles that help prevent or slow the progression of disease. Many older adults are plagued with at least one major disease that significantly impacts the quality of their lives. Second, we discovered that many trainers are not happy with the hours they have to work to build their client base—5 to 10 AM and then 5 to 10 PM. With the medical market, we work a 9 AM to 5 PM schedule, which allows us to have a rich personal and family life.

Most people over the age of 40 have or are at risk for at least one major medical condition, such as heart disease, diabetes, arthritis or osteoporosis. Once diagnosed, they are treated by the medical community with medications and/or therapy. In most cases, patients are told to exercise to help treat or prevent progression of a condition. But there is a lack of service after being discharged from the medical community. There is a tremendous need for qualified fitness professionals to guide patients from medically supervised exercise programs to independent maintenance exercise programs.

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As a certified chiropractic sports physician, I think the focus should not be “How can I get referrals from the medical community?” but instead “How can I develop a working relationship with a physician who understands exercise?” One way to approach this relationship is by referring *your* injured clients to the proper medical professionals first.

Do not diagnose injured clients and

attempt to help them. If you design injured clients’ exercise programs around their physical weaknesses, you do a disservice to these individuals. Instead, refer them to the *appropriate* physician to diagnose their injuries. For example, if a client develops kneecap pain while exercising, do not send the person to a general practitioner but to a sports medicine specialist instead. Then, ask the specialist to assist you in designing the patient’s exercise program.

With this method, you receive the credibility of a sports medicine specialist and probably prevent your clients from reinjuring their preexisting conditions. Not only do you help maintain your clients’ health, but you also add to the services you provide them.

In my experience, I find that trainers with the lowest turnover rates are the ones who follow this formula. Trust me, it will come back to you threefold, especially with client retention. Once the clinician has confidence in your skills, he or she will not hesitate to refer patients to you.

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