

The Personal Trainer's Road to Success

BY DODY BENKO-LIVINGSTON

How do you grow a flourishing business?
Map a course that heads you in the right direction.

Nelson Mandela once said, “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.” You have the power to achieve success as a personal trainer—but not if you fail to recognize opportunity, or run away from it when it reaches out to you. There is no “fairy godtrainer” sending out engraved invitations to those who want to succeed. You have to make your own success by being patient, determined, dedicated, directed and, most of all, proactive. So don’t be timid. Nobody is going to do your job for you, so you had better get started!

Route 1. Decide Where You Are Going

Many trainers make the mistake of running “full speed ahead” without ever thinking seriously about their destination. No wonder they find themselves running in circles and never accomplishing anything! Before you can succeed, you have to know what success means to *you*. It means different things to different people, and it can even mean different things to the same person at different stages of his or her life. Your definition of success is something you need to think about before you start your career—and need to reevaluate as time passes.

Be honest with yourself. Is success how much money you charge? How much money you make? How many clients you have? The type of clients you have? Where you work? Asking yourself the following questions should help you get an idea of where you want to go.

What Do You Want From Personal Training? Income? Self-employment? The chance to be part of a team? Make sure every turn you take along the way leads in the direction you want to go. For example, if money is a primary motivator, you might think about raising your rates or offering group training (5-20 participants) to get more money per hour.

How Many Clients, or Sessions per Week, Do You Need to Feel Successful? It’s easy to berate yourself about how much more you should be doing. But if you’re comfortable working 20 hours a week, why look for more clients? Set realistic goals that are right for you, and reward yourself for every accomplishment you make.

What Hours of the Day Are You Willing to Work? Do you want to work mornings? Afternoons? Weekends? 9 to 5? Keep in mind, you should work when you are at your most alert and energetic.

My very first client wanted to train at 5:00 AM Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. I was not a morning person back then, but against my better judgment, I agreed. I was cranky, irritable and short-tempered during training sessions. Needless to say, the relationship didn’t last long, and I didn’t get any referrals!

If a potential client can train only on weekends and it’s important to you to spend Saturdays and Sundays with your family, think about referring the client to another trainer you respect.

How Many Hours a Week Are You Willing to Put Into the Administration of Your Business? Knowing how many hours you are willing to allot to this portion of your business will help you determine the number of clients you can take on.

For each new client, figure up to 3 hours per week of programming time for the first 3 to 6 weeks. Designing a personalized program and inputting all the information into the computer takes a lot of time and thought. Once a client is set up, you’ll need about 30 minutes to 1 hour a week to create new programs

or adjust the old ones. Add between 3 and 10 hours a month for your own education—videos and workshops to help you design programs that employ all the latest equipment and concepts.

Then you’ve got billing. I recommend billing once a month. If you use a program like Excel, the whole billing process for 10 clients should take about 1 hour. Also expect to spend a minimum of 1 hour a week touching base with clients. Communicating with them outside the training sessions makes them feel accountable and cared for, which improves retention.

Finally, you’ll need to make time for marketing. One month you may spend an hour preparing flyers; another month you may take 10 hours to work on all the promotional materials for a summer blowout at the beach, arranging for newspaper coverage, flyers, radio giveaways, and 20-percent-off coupons to be distributed at your local supermarket with the purchase of certain health food items.

These various time commitments add up to 5 to 21 hours a month for education, billing and marketing, and another 2 to 12 hours a month per client for programming. Once you’ve figured out the time required for both training and administration, make a weekly schedule for yourself—and stick to it.

Do You Want to Work With a Specific Population, or Do You Prefer a Variety of Clients? Do you want to train the general population? Teenagers? Athletes? Pre/postnatal women? Young adults? People with disabilities? Answering this question will help you target your marketing. If you want to work with teenagers, you might pass out flyers at the local youth center; if pre/postnatal women are your target, you could visit hospitals and centers that offer Lamaze classes. Gymboree® or Moms in Motion programs are also good bets, since women participating in programs like these are often planning to have a second child.

Don’t worry too much if you are not immediately sure of the type of clients you want. You may find that a certain population will gravitate toward you because of your own personal experiences, personality type or current clients.

How Much Will You Charge? Decide on your rates and stick to them. Be careful not to price yourself out of the market. Be competitive. My advice is to charge within \$5 to \$10 of the average going rate in your area—without dropping your prices too low. Keep in mind that perceived value is important. Most clients will worry if you charge too little, thinking, “You get what you pay for.”

When answering these questions, be honest with yourself about what type of trainer you are. Don’t try to be something you’re not. It is a lot easier, and more fun, to do your job when you can be yourself.

Once you have a good idea of where you want to go, how do you attract the clients who will help you get there? Over the

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years I have tried many approaches. As might be expected, some worked and some didn't. But I learned just as much from what didn't work as from what did.

Route 2. Stock Up on Knowledge

A vital step in getting ready to reach out to clients is education. Whether you want to work with special populations or the general public, prepare yourself. Of course, you should be knowledgeable about anatomy, exercise science, exercise technique, injury prevention, proper progression, programming, etc., but it is not enough to acquire the basics and get certified. You also need to keep current by going to conventions, reading industry magazines and attending as many workshops as possible. If you have to choose between two workshops, both of which interest you, ask another trainer to go to one while you attend the other; then share the information.

Keep up-to-date on all the latest equipment. Clients and potential clients will be impressed by your familiarity with a variety of training tools, such as medicine balls, resistance balls and balance boards. People love to do what no one else is doing! Don't know how to use all the available equipment? Go to workshops, buy videos or ask another trainer for assistance.

Have you noticed how many times I've said, "Ask another trainer" when suggesting ways to increase your knowledge? Creating a good rapport with colleagues whose work you respect is extremely valuable. You can ask other trainers for advice, share your challenges—and solutions—with them and exchange referrals.

If your knowledge base is solid and you are comfortable with your people skills, you will make it as a trainer. People will recognize your professionalism as you work out yourself, train people outdoors or at the club, or just cruise the club floor offering advice and tips.

The Value of a Price Sheet

When I started out as a trainer, money was the hardest thing for me to talk about. My solution? I printed out a sheet that listed all my services and the prices I charged for them. Whenever someone asked what I charged, I could simply whip out my price sheet and hand it to them.

If you have trouble discussing money with potential clients, a price sheet might work for you too. It should include the fees you charge for all your services—club training, outdoor training, group training, nutrition consultation, etc.—as well as your fees for a single session, five sessions, 10 sessions and so on. Add any packages you'd like to offer, such as a 10 percent discount on five or more prepaid sessions. Finally, explain any policies you feel slightly uncomfortable talking about or negotiating. For example: A \$25 fee will be charged for any session canceled less than 24 hours prior to a scheduled appointment.

I have no problem talking about money now, but when I first started out, the price sheet was a lifesaver. Instead of appearing as nervous as I actually was, I looked professional and well prepared. Plus, when the terms of training were all in writing, clients considered them non-negotiable!

PERSONAL TRAINING WITH DODY
Training Packages & Fees

Consultation and Physical Evaluation: • Body Fat Testing • Girth Measurements • Blood Pressure • RPE and 5-ARHR Pictures • Cardiovascular & Muscular Strength tests/writing • Nutritional Analysis Evaluation	\$ 20
1 Hour Personal Training Session For current clients who need a program review, change of 100000 goals, every 4 weeks	\$ 50
1.5 Hour Review For current clients who need a program review, change of 100000 goals, every 4 weeks	\$ 65
Start-up Package (1500-2100) Includes 2-1 hour sessions and a 15 hour 2 week course	\$200
6-1 Hour Sessions 6-1 Hour Sessions (over 500)	\$500
10-1 Hour Sessions (over 1000)	\$384
14-1 Hour Sessions (over 1400)	\$470

Monthly Package Suggestions

2 x WEEK 11 One Hour Sessions \$384.00 (over 510)	3 x WEEK 12 One Hour Sessions \$540.00 (over 200)
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Or create your own workout package!

Home Visits and Outdoor Training \$70/hr	TEAM UP grab a partner & double the fun \$70/hr
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DISCOUNTS ONLY AT DODY'S CLUBS
 Discounts apply only to packages paid in advance
 Dody Benko (805) 965-0509 or (805) 964-7757

Route 3. Make Yourself Known—and Accessible

Where do you find clients, and where do they find you, especially if you are not in a club? Sometimes the best place to start looking is in your own backyard. For example, I have asthma, so I spoke to my doctor and the American Lung Association and got involved in Camp Wheeze, a camp for children with asthma.

Are *your* potential clients working out at the local stadium? Are they at the community center or senior center? Or are they nonexercisers still waiting for you to reach out to them? Wherever they are, you have to find them and make yourself and your services known.

Make up **flyers** that include your bio. Describe your qualifications and services, note that you are currently accepting new clients, and give a number to call for an appointment. Distribute the flyers in clubs, physical therapy and chiropractic offices, even coffeehouses. Hand out copies to athletic teams and high-school coaches. (The best way to persuade people to distribute your information is to offer them a free session so they get to know you. Once you've wowed them with your talents, they'll not only distribute your flyers but may even sign up as clients themselves!) Sometimes a simple flyer distributed around your neighborhood or a small ad in the local newspaper is just the thing to reach a nonexerciser.

Get lists of people from your friends and family, and mail a flyer to everyone on the lists. You'd be surprised how many people you can reach through friends and family.

Money permitting, a great move is to have your **business card made into magnets**. Insert a magnet in every envelope you send out. Most people will put the magnet on their refrigerator, so even if they are not ready for you now, they'll remember you when they are. You can have magnets made at any major printing company, like Kinko's. The cost depends on how many you purchase and how many colors you use. A cheaper alternative is to have your business card printed on sticky paper and then buy large magnet sheets at a store like Office Depot. You can simply paste the stickers on the magnet sheet and cut the sheet to size. You may even be able to find a company online that could make magnets for a good price.

Proofread everything you send out. Misprints and careless mistakes make you look unprofessional and could actually lose you clients.

If you work in a facility, make sure you **look accessible** as you walk the floor. When you approach people or they approach you, be aggressive in your enthusiasm but not in your attitude. If you are eager to share your knowledge with people because you know what a difference it could make in their lives, not just because you want to "make a sale," your sincerity will show. But remem-

ber, nobody likes a hard sell. If you are as good as you think you are, your actions, professionalism and high standards will speak for you. If you are around enough and make your face known, people will ask for you.

Route 4. Look the Part

You want people to see you as an educated professional, so look like one. Don't dress like a gym rat. Select an outfit or a style of attire as your "uniform." You can wear a nice T-shirt or jacket with "Fitness Trainer" or "Personal Trainer" printed on the back of it. Wear it everywhere, and you'll find that people will approach you with questions. I often go to the grocery store after work, and at least once a week—sometimes three or more times a week—I'm asked where I work and what I specialize in. I give out about five cards a month just at the grocery store.

Of course, if you work for a club, you may have a uniform, which gives you one less thing to worry about.

Route 5. Put Together a Professional Tool Kit

Here is a handy checklist to make sure you have all the paperwork you need in order to stand out as a true professional. Hire a graphic artist to help you design a special logo and create consistency in all your stationery. If you are a freelance trainer, make sure people will notice what you print. Be creative. Everyone loves colors, so pick a color theme. Even if you are in a club that provides you with paperwork, ask if you can print everything up in colors. The slight extra expense really pays off. You'd be surprised at how often members and clients notice the little things.

Business cards, price sheets, note cards, personal workout cards and gift certificates should be printed on card-stock-quality paper because they go to clients. Health questionnaires, waivers of liability and tracking sheets are your property, so for these, regular paper is just fine.

Business Cards. I've discovered that, especially with newer trainers, business cards with head shots are a surefire hit. They make you immediately recognizable. Make sure you put your name, company name (if you have one) and contact information, including both phone number and e-mail address.

Always have your business cards with you, especially when you are on the floor at the club.

Colored Folders. When you meet with a client for the first time, create a favorable impression by having a colored folder with the client's name in bold letters on the front and all the paperwork inside, color coded and ready to go.

Health Questionnaires. If you are an independent trainer or your club doesn't provide health questionnaires to hand out to

Resources

clients, prepare a form of your own. (See the “Resources” sidebar.) Clients’ health information is strictly confidential, so always keep filled-out questionnaires covered.

Waivers of Liability. Of course, liability insurance is a must. (See “Resources” on this page.) To protect yourself, have each client sign a waiver, and keep it in his or her file.

Price Sheets. Using card stock for your price sheets makes them more professional. You don’t need to use an entire card for each sheet—try to get two price sheets per card. A smaller price sheet is less bulky for a client to carry anyway. (See “The Value of a Price Sheet” sidebar.)

Personal Workout Cards. These are the cards you give clients, containing the entire workout programs you have created. If you work for a club, chances are members may keep their cards in a box on-site. If not, suggest the idea. Clients appreciate not having to bring their cards with them—especially since they usually forget!

My clients love my workout cards. I use 10-by-16-inch sheets folded in half in colors like bright yellow, deep orange and baby blue. On the front is my company name and on the back is my motto, “Be strong—Be fit—Be your best!” The inside contains an entire workout schedule and a tracking section for 15 workouts. As my clients walk around the club with their workout cards, other club members want to know why their cards aren’t as fancy. Thanks to these special cards, I get at least one call a week from a client who has never even met me.

Tracking Sheets. You should track every workout you do with a client, marking down the exercises performed, number of repetitions, amount of resistance, etc. Aside from helping you chart your client’s progress, the tracking sheets have an added benefit. Carrying around a professional-looking clipboard with a brightly colored tracking sheet wherever you are performing your training sessions draws attention to what you are doing—and that’s good!

Stationery and Note Cards With Your Logo or Name. Clients feel flattered when

you send them a card for no reason. I had note cards printed with my name and motto on the front. Then I had stamps made, using fun comments like “Celebrating You,” “Way to Go,” “Happy Birthday” and “Welcome Back.” Depending on the circumstances, I just stamp in the appropriate phrase and send off a card. This is one small way to put the “personal” back into “personal training.” Sending out notes not only encourages client retention but also leads to word-of-mouth advertising. Sending a card to a client’s place of business is a great way to start a discussion about your services. And word of mouth is a proven way to pick up serious, long-term clients.

Fun Stickers. Even adults love to be acknowledged. Every week I check my clients’ workout cards and put a star or fun sticker on the days they worked out. My clients have gotten so used to this practice that if I miss a week, they’ll call me and ask me where their sticker is! Keep in mind that training is about making your clients look *and feel* good.

Gift Certificates. Whenever anyone asks you to donate sessions for charity, it’s a good idea to do it. Gift certificates come in handy here. By donating a certificate for one or two sessions, you get your name mentioned in front of lots of people, who will probably be impressed by your philanthropic endeavors. Of course, the person who wins the gift certificate is a potential client, but you’ll most likely get calls from other people who were at the charity event but didn’t win any free sessions. You may well end up with a permanent client. My experience with gift certificates has been particularly interesting. In the 10 years I have been donating them, not one person who has won a certificate has redeemed it. But more than 20 people who heard about me through the associated auction or event have either hired me for initial consultations or are still working with me!

Gift certificates also come in handy around the holidays. Advertise the certificates in the local newspaper, holiday coupon books, sporting goods stores and health food chains. People appreciate easy-to-get, creative gifts.

Books

Policies That Work for Personal Trainers by Susan Cantwell. Tips on pricing sessions, communicating with clients, payment and billing options, record keeping and administration. Includes reproducible forms. IDEA, (800) 999-4332, ext. 7, www.IDEAFit.com.

The Successful Trainer’s Guide to Marketing by Sherri McMillan, MSc. Money-making programs and proven marketing techniques. Includes sample business cards, brochures, flyers and actual conversation scripts for selling clients on your services. IDEA, (800) 999-4332, ext. 7, www.IDEAFit.com.

ACE Personal Trainer Manual. Anatomy, training techniques, injury prevention, legal issues. Contains sample health questionnaires, liability waivers and tracking sheets. American Council on Exercise, (800) 825-3636, www.acefitness.org.

A Guide to Personal Fitness Training. Fitness assessment, kinesiology review, endurance and flexibility programming. Also contains sample forms. Aerobics and Fitness Association of America, (877) 968-7263, www.afa.com.

Insurance

Fitness & Wellness Insurance Agency. Provides IDEA members with liability and occupational accident insurance specifically geared to fitness professionals. Visit www.ideafit.com/membership/pro_insurance.asp for information

Growing in the Right Direction

Henry David Thoreau said it best: "If you advance confidently in the direction of your dreams, and endeavor to live the life you have imagined, you will meet with a success unexpected in common hours." Once you have determined what success as a personal trainer means to you, you can head in the proper direction, using the techniques described here.

Personal trainers too often forget that what distinguishes them is their attention to detail. What will make you the trainer clients want for their own? The fact that you care about your clients and strive to give them the best. From your dedication to keeping up-to-date on training techniques and equipment to the paperwork you hand out, you make your clients feel special. Who can resist a trainer like that?

Dody Benko-Livingston is certified by the National Academy of Sports Medicine and the Aerobics and Fitness Association of America and is a master trainer for Resist-a-Ball. She owns her own fitness consulting business and has been a senior trainer for Gold's Gyms in Santa Barbara and for the University of California at Santa Barbara, as well as a presenter for World Fitness IDEA®. Currently, she is fitness manager for Frog's Club One in Solana Beach, California. She was the 1997 recipient of the IDEA Fitness Inspiration Award.

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