

Seven Secrets for Totally Outrageous Teaching

Unleash your inner customer service representative and give participants the attention they deserve.

Are you ready to take the next step in *truly* making a difference in people's lives? Have you thought about ways you can elevate your teaching and professionalism?

Several years ago I attended a seminar where I learned how to identify what people want and expect in the way of customer service. The reason for doing this was simple—once you identify what people want, it's easy to give it to them. Better yet, if you give them a little more than they want, you become a star. I had a hunch that the same principle would hold true for fitness instructors. I tried it, and it works every time!

What do your students and members want? Results! Their goal might be weight loss, a stronger cardiovascular system, bigger muscles, more energy or stress relief. Or perhaps they're seeking a break from their hectic days—time for themselves away from the grind. They'd like to have fun and to sense that you care! They expect instruction, encouragement and direction—a good and varied workout from a trained, knowledgeable professional, not a game of “follow the leader.” They want to get their money's worth.

Here are some simple ways you can meet your participants' expectations and become a totally outrageous group fitness instructor.

1. LET THEM SUCCEED, AND MAKE THAT FUN FOR EVERYONE

Each class should offer some measure of success. Structure the format so that participants can do whatever you're doing at their own levels. The best way to achieve this is to teach a multilevel class so that *everyone* will

feel a sense of achievement. (For more on how to teach a multilevel class, refer to past *IDEA Fitness Journal* Master Class columns.) If students learned a new move, stretched a little farther or climbed a harder hill in indoor cycling, point that out! The feeling of success feeds participants and fuels them to accomplish more.

From my experience, women tend to dive into exercise as though they had endless energy, whereas men tend to plan their energy expenditure, holding back if they don't know what they're going to need to get through class. To help men succeed, tell them *specifically* what you're going to do next. As class progresses, announce what you expect of them and for how long. Be careful not to overload them with lengthy explanations; explain only what they need to know for the next move or series of exercises. You will be amazed at the results.

Cuing is another key to success. Let the class know what's coming, to ease transitions and to maintain flow. Cuing takes time to perfect, but it's essential. Music-driven instructors often find that cuing the next move two or three beats in advance works best. However, sometimes you need to explain a move in more detail ahead of time. If so, tell students to continue what they're doing while you demonstrate or explain the next move. Then cue two to three beats ahead when you're ready to do the new step.

How you make things fun is an individual matter and the hardest thing to teach. I use comedy to entertain students while still keeping the workout itself serious. Comedy works well for me and comes naturally. Figure out a few humorous comments you can use to gently attract participants' attention. For example, if students are talking during class, grin and announce, “Research shows that people who come to class and actually work out get better results than those who come

and chat.” When a question is met with blank stares, cheerfully say, “If I wanted to be ignored, I could have just stayed home.” Use quips like these only if it suits your personality and you know you won't offend anyone. Otherwise, think of alternate ways to engage class members in a light-hearted manner, always showing that you care. Don't be discouraged if an idea bombs. Learn from it and quickly move to the next one. Don't give up; totally outrageous teachers keep going without dwelling on what didn't work.

Awarding prizes is another way to have fun in class. Ask a fitness question related to a current exercise, and pull a prize out of your bag for the first person who gives the correct answer. I have given water bottles, towels—even a fake pearl necklace. I have also presented Olympic-style medals as Outstanding Achievement Awards.

2. MAINTAIN A PROFESSIONAL APPEARANCE

Do you look as though you're at the gym for your own workout, or do you present yourself as a trained professional ready to help others? Food seems to taste better on china with linens and silver; the same food doesn't taste as good slopped on paper plates. The difference lies in the presentation—your eye tells you one is better than the other before you even open your mouth.

The key word here is *presentation*. Your personal presentation communicates a lot. Professional tennis players dress differently when they practice or work out than they do on game day. It should be the same for instructors, although you don't have to wear a complete name-brand-sponsored outfit to look the part of a fitness professional. Avoid clothing that is too sexy, torn, stained or worn-out. Professional-looking instructors are perceived as more knowledgeable, credible, effective and successful.

Your clothing affects *your* mood as much as the moods of your participants. If the effect is positive, you gain confidence.

3. BE APPROACHABLE AND HOST THE ROOM

Be prepared for class *before* it starts. Have your music ready and make sure the room is set up. As students enter, face the door and personally greet them. Learn as many names as you can, and make a special effort to welcome newcomers; introduce yourself and tell them you're glad they came. Think of the classroom as your living room. If someone walked through your front door at home, would you turn your back, not even say hello and continue with whatever you were doing?

If possible, play music as your students walk in. Make it completely different from your class music, with a slower beat than your first selection. (Your official start will be clear, and the first song will lift the energy.) This preliminary music helps set the pace and gives the message that you are prepared, in charge and ready to work. Participants get in place faster as a result.

Most people have busy, demanding lives, and getting to the gym at all is a big deal. Step outside of your comfort zone to make students feel welcome and comfortable. Don't forget to greet late arrivers, and don't treat a student as if he's invisible if he leaves early. Say good-bye and thank him for coming. This also signals the other students that you are continually aware of them.

It isn't always possible to prepare the room if there's a class ahead of you, but do what you can. Have your music in hand, and be prepared to give instructions. If you're waiting outside for the class before yours to end, take the opportunity to talk with students. Never pass up a chance to interact.

4. SHOW THEM YOU CARE

My guess is that at least 70% of facility members, if asked, would say they don't get a sense that instructors care about them. You certainly *must* care, because without students you'd be unemployed. To show you are genuine, smile often and make eye contact with everyone several times during class. Also, watch your body language. For example, crossed arms might give the impression that you're not interested. Chewing gum may send the signal you are bored. Learn names, and

use them as often as possible. Continuously find ways to connect with participants, and always thank them—for smiling, for being there, for working hard and for making your day.

5. BE AN INSTRUCTOR, NOT A PERFORMER

Performers care more about themselves than the class and often are totally unaware of students. Performers stare at themselves and are concerned mostly with their own appearance and/or performance. They give directions as if reading a monotone preflight announcement that everyone tunes out. Performers are a huge turnoff to students, because the students are not being *taught* anything.

Outstanding instructors are aware of the class at all times. They lead class and give group instruction in addition to individual, one-on-one training, correction, motivation and encouragement.

Be there for members—this is *their* workout, not *yours*. Leave your “post” up front and walk around. Yes, cycling instructors need to get off their bikes to give individual instruction or compliments. Only performers stay at their “spot” throughout the entire session. Giving proper instruction is an opportunity to step outside your safe world and truly make a difference in someone else's life.

6. START AND END ON TIME

If you don't start or end on schedule, it sends the message that your students' time is not important to you. It also trains them to think that in the future *they* don't have to be on time. Show respect for class members by using the full time they have allotted you. It's an honor and a gift to have them for that period. Be in the studio ahead of schedule (see secret #3) and begin promptly. End on time, too. If you go over to make up for starting late, some participants may lose interest and be disappointed because they expected the class to end at a certain time. Others may simply need to be out on time to fulfill obligations.

7. MOTIVATE AND ENCOURAGE

Consistently tell participants how well they are doing as a group. More important, make a point of telling them *individually*. This is where outstanding instructors shine. When the moment is

right during or after class, tell a student that you notice she is mastering (fill in the blank). Or tell another participant how to improve a movement; it may be the only encouragement he gets all day. Individual praise can truly make a difference. Becoming “student centered” will take you to the next level of outstanding teaching.

Incorporate these attitudes and behaviors into your teaching, and not only will you be a more effective instructor—you will also earn the admiration and respect of your students. They will be motivated to show up and work hard and will go home pleased with their results. What's more, you'll be a *totally outrageous fitness instructor*.

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