
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Authority Figures

By establishing expertise, great coaches can make connections with current members as well as potential clients.

By Chris Cooper

January 2015



Chris Cooper/CrossFit Journal

When people have fitness-related questions, whom do they call? In the age of opinion, many aren't sure where to turn for real answers.

Before 2001, CrossFit Founder and CEO Greg Glassman was teaching CrossFit, but few knew about it. In 2001, CrossFit.com went up, and in April 2002 the CrossFit Journal site followed and became home to Glassman's foundational writings about the program.

1 of 5

Through articles such as “[Foundations](#),” seminars, technique videos and other media output, the CrossFit message spread from Santa Cruz, California, and generated more than 10,000 affiliated gyms by 2014.

Glassman is called “Coach” by most who meet him, and he’s an authority figure in the fitness world. Coaches and affiliate owners keenly attuned to Glassman’s “pursuit of excellence” credo work hard to better their skills daily through self-evaluation, continuing education and professional development. CrossFit coaches are getting better all the time. But do their clients know? Their clients’ friends? The local community at large? The baker, the butcher, the candlestick maker?

In other words, does the market appreciate their expertise?

“Authority is recognizability and trustability,” Seth Godin, a popular business writer, wrote in “[Striving for Authority](#).” Godin believes establishing authority is one of the most critical branding strategies in the new business landscape. In the “opinion age,” it can be hard for clients to trust service providers. With dodgy information available everywhere, professional coaches can

still stand out as experts if they practice the strategy of “show, don’t tell.”

Authority “comes from showing up. It comes from telling your truth and consistently sharing your point of view,” Godin wrote.

CrossFit coaches have the opportunity to display expertise in every class, but some gym owners are taking it beyond the walls of their gym and finding ways to stand out in their local market.

Every Damn Day

“Why are we doing this workout?”

Coaches who clearly explain the benefit of each workout aren’t just helping the client; they might be helping themselves. A man concerned with weight loss is bound to care less about improving his Fran time than reducing his midline—at least at first. If he knows the value of short, intense anaerobic exercise, he’s more likely to buy into the program. If he isn’t sure how thrusters and pull-ups will help him meet his goals, he might keep one eye on the door. Keep in mind many people have been raised on long bouts of cardio and 3-sets-of-8 routines with roots in bodybuilding.



Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

By showcasing his knowledge through media, unknown California trainer Greg Glassman quickly became one of the foremost authorities in fitness today.

“Greg (Glassman) helped me realize the training I was doing in the gym had real-life value to it.”

—Greg Amundson

A useful analogy from the business world is that of buying drill bits and buying holes. As the lesson goes, “People don’t go to the hardware store to buy a half-inch drill bit; they go to buy a half-inch hole in their wall.” In other words, the drill bit is the tool required to hang a picture; it’s not the goal itself. Thrusters, cleans and ring dips are versatile tools that can be used to deliver different elements of fitness. It’s up to the coach to explain how they’re used. The best coaches can demonstrate proper use but also reveal why those tools were chosen for the workout.

Authority ... (continued)

Establishing expertise doesn't always mean technical lectures on energy pathways and metabolic processes. But coaches who can explain complex concepts in simple terms are often highly regarded by their members.

"You don't understand mathematics until you can explain it to your grandmother," Albert Einstein famously said, comparing the possession of knowledge with its application.

Rendering a scientific concept relevant to a wide variety of clientele is one of Glassman's greatest strengths. A whiteboard lecture at the original CrossFit gym was more than an outline of the daily workout. It was an explanation of the workout's particular benefits to each athlete.

"Greg (Glassman) helped me realize the training I was doing in the gym had real-life value to it," said Greg Amundson, who trained with Glassman and now runs CrossFit Amundson in Santa Cruz.

"I was result-driven then," Amundson continued. "I cared about the effect, not the cause. I was a cop. Eva (Twardokens) was a gold medalist. Mike (Weaver) was fighting. (Glassman) taught us that what we were doing in the gym exceeded what the real world would ask of us."

Before Amundson became a coach, the knowledge imparted at a daily whiteboard meeting met his needs as a client. Only later did he care to delve into Glassman's rationale more deeply.

"The first two times he told me about the Zone Diet, it was very technical," Amundson recalled. "He gave me the book; I read the book. A couple of days later I said, 'Coach, just tell me what to eat.'"

When Amundson was ready for the next level of knowledge, Glassman provided more. The learning curve was thus spread over years, and Amundson never doubted he was training with the best.

Other clients also knew how CrossFit would benefit them. Some, like Jimmy Baker, recognized Glassman's expertise had the potential to change an industry.

"We didn't think he was histrionic when he was saying, 'We're going to change the way people think about fitness in the world,'" Baker said in a [2009 CrossFit Journal interview](#).



Chris Cooper/CrossFit Journal

By filming your coaches at work, you can easily create great content that helps athletes and showcases the expertise of your staff members.

Glassman could make such a statement because he had established his expertise in the minds of his clients.

Knowing a client's real-world application of CrossFit is important to establishing authority. A good coach will discover a client's goals and make the link between the stimulus and the intended outcome.

As Ashley Forbis of CrossFit Voltage put it, "We want our clients to know more about fitness than the trainers at any other gym in town."

Successfully branding a gym as the local source of fitness knowledge creates an umbrella effect: When new fitness enthusiasts wonder about a diet or workout program, they know whom to ask. Building a reputation as the source of that expertise requires consistent delivery of content. In short, you have to put yourself onstage. Show, don't tell.

Daily workout posts can include the rationale behind the prescription. Blog posts explaining the value and implementation of the Zone Diet will appeal to dieters

who haven't yet found CrossFit. Chiropractors might find a "how to squat" handout helpful for their clients. Shoe stores might appreciate a squat clinic. And nurses might appreciate a nutrition seminar at 11 p.m.

For example, offering a local newspaper a monthly column on health and fitness benefits everyone involved. The paper gains an expert opinion and can then sell ads around popular, informative content, while the reader learns how to squat or eat better. The coach improves his or her reputation as a fount of knowledge and draws attention to the gym and its programs.

In another example, offering a free nutrition seminar to a local business can help increase market exposure, but it also helps the business by improving morale, staff health and teamwork. As above, the gym owner gains reputé and might even acquire a new client or two. Everyone wins.

The key is to identify your areas of expertise, find someone who needs help and then offer it. The whole idea relates

back to Glassman's original ideas: Markets are ultimately unknowable, but excellence and expertise are rewarded in almost every market.

The Power of Media

The question "what is CrossFit?" has been a topic of discussion among affiliate owners from the start. "Constantly varied functional movement performed at high intensity" is a good description, but many coaches attempt to tailor their answer to the audience in front of them. Whatever their go-to "elevator pitch," owners and coaches might be better served by answering the questions before they're asked.

For example, a two-minute video titled "Why You Should Squat" is more likely to resonate with a non-exerciser than another called "Ankle Flexibility in the Overhead Squat." The two clips will appeal to very different markets and showcase expertise in different ways.

Many coaches recognize these opportunities to brand themselves as experts but aren't sure how to take advantage of them. After all, is there anything YouTube hasn't already covered? Don't people already know how to squat?

Perhaps, but globo-gym patrons and couch potatoes need information, and a video of a local expert demonstrating a squat, push-up or deadlift might trigger the start of a new fitness journey. It might also give people new insight, demonstrating they actually don't know what they don't know. After all, everyone knows how to squat—until they realize they really don't.

Demonstrating expertise to a broader audience is easier than ever before. Content creation was once the province of those with the money to buy expensive equipment. That's no longer the case, and affiliates and coaches can generate quality content without investing a lot of money in gear. A bit of technical expertise or skill might be needed to focus the camera or edit a blog article, but that can be learned, and publishing costs are minimal or non-existent in the age of websites and YouTube. Content costs coaches little more than time.

Taking a short video while coaching, adding a logo and uploading to YouTube is a good demonstration of competence. Asking other coaches in the gym to create content as part of a continuing-education strategy is another, and



Tyson Oldroyd/CrossFit Journal

Video and print content help a business establish its expertise and connect with members of the community.



Michael Brian/CrossFit Journal

Through videos and a strong online presence, experts such as Tony Blauer (right) shared their knowledge and established themselves as authority figures in their fields.

doing so doesn't have to add hours of work to a packed schedule. Similarly, filming in-class coaching can simply be part of a coach's routine, creating a way to capture scenes that are happening every day.

CrossFit coaches have changed the lives of thousands and have the opportunity to help millions more. But their collective knowledge lies silent until they show it off.

The ability to distill, translate and deliver knowledge is the hallmark of a great coach. CrossFit coaches have changed the lives of thousands and have the opportunity to help millions more. But their collective knowledge lies silent until they show it off.

As more gyms embrace the "functional fitness" approach, including some who do so simply by throwing a few kettlebells in a corner, it's important for coaches to nurture their reputation as experts, differentiate themselves from the competition, and showcase their excellence and value.

After all, if you don't tell people what you know—who will?



About the Author:

Chris Cooper owns [CrossFit Catalyst](http://www.crossfitcatalyst.com) and writes for the [CrossFit Journal](http://journal.crossfit.com). He's the author of "Two-Brain Business."