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"You've Gotta Try CrossFit!"

Referrals are key to running a successful box, and many affiliate owners have found creative yet organic ways to generate word of mouth that brings new faces into the gym.

By Emily Beers

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Courtesy of CrossFit Tucker

At CrossFit Tucker, before-and-after pictures showcase the dramatic effects of CrossFit training.

One of the founding tenets of CrossFit affiliation is letting the excellence of your training, your coaches, your facility and your community create referrals so you don't have to devote your life to lead generation and sales.

In other words, professional coaches help their clients achieve tremendous levels of fitness, and these clients naturally tell their friends about the gym.

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That doesn't mean affiliate owners can't go out and "kill their own meat"—aka generate business leads themselves. A CrossFit community might feel like family, but affiliates are still businesses, and they survive by getting clients in the door and then getting them fit. The keys are creating organic, classy ways to generate referrals and educating new clients about CrossFit—all while focusing on providing great service to every athlete in the gym.

Setting the Right Tone: CrossFit Tucker

Interestingly enough, while referrals have often been considered the lifeblood of an affiliate, Luke Davis of CrossFit Tucker in Tucker, Georgia, warns owners not to get too stressed out about motivating their clients to bring friends. In his experience, Davis has discovered referrals don't always create the best clients.

"The way I look at things is that when people come to join my gym, I'm very honest with them and I tell them how hard it's going to be. I tell them, 'If you're not able to eventually train four days a week, this probably isn't the place for you,'" Davis said. "I don't necessarily want to waste their time and effort if they can't commit."

Davis suspects when a client refers a friend or family member, he or she often only talks about one part of the process.

"Often the friend has only talked about the good things, and he doesn't mention how hard it actually is," Davis said.

This rose-colored referral has led to situations in which the new prospect comes in wanting and expecting easy results but is sometimes unwilling to put in the hard work that's required.

"(The referred athlete) doesn't really understand the entire struggle their friend went through," Davis explained.

The other aspect of this story is the fact that everyone's journey is different.

"What if (the new athlete) has tight hips? He might not get the same results as fast. It might take him three months (to achieve) what took his friend one month," Davis said.

He added: "When people sign up, I always tell them, 'Be very cautious of who you bring in with you.'"



Courtesy of Mark Nolan



Courtesy of Mark Nolan

By creating a tight-knit community, affiliate owners often find their clients want to bring their friends to the box for fitness and fun.



Courtesy of Adrian Reyes

Those who participate in Fit-it-Forward at CrossFit Hunger take on challenges such as teaching others how to squat.

This isn't to say Davis doesn't take in referred clients. He just makes sure he vets his prospects properly and educates them.

"If we're not properly vetting our new people who come in, it's a waste of our time and effort and resources," Davis said. "Referrals from members are great as long as they're willing to email me, tell me their goals and get behind it. If they're just coming in expecting immediate results ... they weren't really interested in working hard, and then they talk shit about it and drag others down."

For Davis, his focus will always be on promoting his current loyal members first. Bringing in new clients is a secondary priority. Recently, however, Davis has found a way to do both at once.

"I was posting the daily WOD one day, and I noticed a member had a profile picture up. He was doing an adventure race. He is in great shape now, and I remembered that he used to be overweight," Davis explained.

After that realization, Davis posted a testimonial from his client, complete with a before-and-after picture showing

the transformation. People in his community responded to the testimonial, and pretty soon more of his clients started sending him before and after pictures. So Davis kept it rolling by creating a [testimonials page on his website](#).

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"The goal is to have everyone up there. It's their pride page," Davis said. "It's a good way to show their hard work and accomplishments."

The page is littered with comments about hard work, overcoming challenges and being humbled before succeeding, which sets the right tone and eliminates any perceptions that results are easily gained.

Davis said his testimonials page instantly drove new leads to his gym. He believes it's because the prospective member sees normal-looking people who have undergone serious transformations, which helps them get over their intimidation and fear of contacting a CrossFit coach.

Davis is pleased with the new business his testimonial page has brought in.

"We're struggling to keep up with the numbers (of leads) coming in," he said.

Despite the influx, Davis' priority remains the same: He's interested in quality leads and committed athletes—athletes who are focused on health achieved over time.

"You can get masses in the door. Quality members are hard to find," he said.

Davis' screening process for quality doesn't stop when someone steps through the door. He won't even let a new person give him a payment on the first day of training.

"I tell them, 'You need to go home and think about it.

I would rather you not be held here by your money or contract," Davis said.

Because of Davis' careful attention to finding devoted members, the clients who stick around at his affiliate are completely committed to a long-term fitness plan. Proof of this is the fact that 100 percent of his members competed in the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games Open.

As a bonus, this kind of commitment means collecting money from clients is never a problem. Davis doesn't remember ever chasing down a client for a payment.

"I have people emailing me asking, 'Did my new credit card work?'" he laughed.

That's the kind of client Davis is looking to coach.

CrossFit Ann Arbor: Philosophy and Image

Doug Chapman, a former member of CrossFit's Level 1 Seminar Staff and the owner of CrossFit Ann Arbor/Hyperfit USA in Michigan, believes you can give your business an edge in the referral and lead-generation

departments if you pay careful attention to your affiliate's specific brand.

For Chapman, this means carefully deciding what message he wants put out to his local market via his social media and website posts. He believes a good message helps affiliates attract new leads, as well as referrals from current clients.

"You need to figure out your local market and have local brand awareness," said Chapman, who has coached two-time CrossFit Games podium finisher Julie Foucher for her entire career. "This means consistently posting articles that are worthy of being linked to. To manage and increase your SEO (search-engine optimization) is to have articles people want to link to. It adds to the credibility of your website."

Another part of tailoring his branding to attract new clients is taking the focus off elite CrossFit athletes on both social media and his affiliate's website.

"We focus on the average person," Chapman said. "Just because our programming can create high-level athletes doesn't mean it's geared to that."



While Doug Chapman coaches Games athlete Julie Foucher, he says he gears the branding of his affiliate to appeal to the average person.



Courtesy of Luke Davis

Luke Davis of CrossFit Tucker says his priority is promoting current members first. Bringing in new clients is secondary.

Chapman consciously uses social media to post pictures of the average athlete in the gym, as opposed to always featuring the Fouchers of the world. He said this attracts referrals more than promoting a CrossFit Games athlete would.

When putting together referral-generating initiatives like Bring a Friend, Chapman always stays away from offering financial discounts or giveaways.

While his online presence is designed to subtly attract referrals, Chapman is also a believer in certain more deliberate attempts to attract friends of friends. One way he does this is through his Bring a Friend program.

“We host a seminar for people to bring their friends, and we explain what we do and why we do it,” Chapman said. After that, his current clients put their own friends through

an introductory workout. Having someone they trust—the friend who brought them along—right there helps the new recruits feel more comfortable and helps bring people together through “communal suffering,” Chapman explained.

When putting together referral-generating initiatives like Bring a Friend, Chapman always stays away from offering financial discounts or giveaways such as free months of training or free products.

“You don’t go to the neurosurgeon and negotiate what it’s going to cost. You want your coaches to be professional trainers,” Chapman said.

He added: “It would cheapen the product (to give it away for less). When you’re really good at what you do, it would totally undermine your program.”

And for Chapman, he makes it very clear that his best referral generator has been and always will be the quality training clients receive at his gym. Chapman pointed to his gym’s reputation and his clients’ results as things that bring in more clients than any referral system ever could.

CrossFit Hunger's Hidden Success

Adrian Reyes of CrossFit Hunger in Corrales, New Mexico, launched a campaign to generate referrals last year. He called it Fit-it-Forward.

He used Facebook to release a fitness challenge each day for one week, and wrote an associated blog post for each challenge.

One of the challenges that was particularly successful involved his clients teaching someone they know how to squat properly and then submitting a picture of the experience. The result couldn't have been better.

Reyes said the impromptu lessons included "everything from large orientation classes at someone's workplace to multiple classes of students and teachers on a playground to complete and total strangers at a grocery store to ASL (American Sign Language) students and signing."

He added: "All the smiles and the happy faces. ... It was so incredibly inspiring."

The campaign generated more than a hundred leads for Reyes. That said, he admitted he didn't convert all that many into clients for one reason or another—mostly because many of the people didn't live in his area.

But Fit-it-Forward was anything but a failure for Reyes. While the program didn't create a lot of new revenue and members, the energy it created in Reyes' community—and the people it touched along the way—was invaluable.

"It was a heartwarming week to say the least," he said. "And thanks to the Internet and Facebook, it actually spread beyond the 505 (area code)."

He added: "It just felt good to know we were stimulating happiness."

To generate more happiness, Reyes ran Fit-it-Forward again this year with a different focus.

"We want to encourage participation from the (greater) health-and-wellness community in our area and don't want any gyms to avoid this because it's got our name on it," he said.



Courtesy of Derek Goff

A CrossFit community may feel like family, but affiliates are businesses and they survive by getting clients in the door and getting them fit.

This year's campaign took place in October. Reyes released challenges throughout the month on his Facebook page. Each challenge was accompanied by a video explanation.

The challenges reached beyond the realm of physical fitness this year, and they were partially a way to remind his members of the larger community outside the gym.

The broad range of challenges allowed for interpretation and creativity, and they were inspired by the book "How to Make Friends and Influence People" by Dale Carnegie.

In one challenge video, Reyes urged business owners in the health-and-wellness field—chiropractors, Lululemon store managers, gym owners—to spread the challenge to other people in their lives.

His first challenge was simple: Hold a door open for someone. If you already do that on a regular basis, then your challenge was to get someone else to hold a door open.

Another challenge was to try to keep someone warm.

"How you interpret that is up to you," Reyes said in the video. "It can be donating a jacket to the homeless. ... You could take a hot cup of cocoa or cider to the crossing guard crossing kids at school," he suggested.

The overarching theme for Reyes was using the challenges to showcase the humanity in his community.

Through the Fit-it-Forward experience, the lesson learned is that referral-generating campaigns can have multiple goals. This year, Fit-it-Forward was as much about solidifying the current community as it was about generating new business. Any new leads it generated were a bonus to the energy it created.

That said, many affiliate owners agree these initiatives shouldn't be the prime focus, and word of mouth is generally still the biggest winner when owners are asked about how they obtain referrals.

Mark Nolan of Molon Labe CrossFit in Macedonia, Ohio, was curious to discover exactly what brought all his

current clients to his box, so he conducted a survey and received answers from three-quarters of his 100 members.

The replies showed that 1 percent of members came after seeing a flyer or advertisement he put in the newspaper, while 5 percent came in after randomly Googling "CrossFit." Another 12 percent joined his box after attending a local event Nolan sponsored outside his gym, while 15 percent were Nolan's friends prior to his opening Molon Labe CrossFit in 2012.

That left a whopping 42 percent who had heard about the gym through word of mouth. The other 25 percent didn't participate in the survey. In many cases, the word-of-mouth clients saw a friend's picture on Facebook, which may have piqued their interest. More often than not, though, the greatest motivating factor was speaking directly to the friend and having him or her vouch for CrossFit.

"(Facebook) helps get folks comfortable with the idea of CrossFit from a distance," Nolan said. But that Facebook interaction probably isn't enough on its own.

"Nothing compares to having your athletes get the results and then start talking to their friends," he said. "Face-to-face contact is still the best way to get folks in the door."

This is, of course, what CrossFit has always been about: spreading the message to others. And the best way to ensure your clients spread this message has always been to provide them with a great experience. When this virtuosity is in place, your athletes become more fit than they ever imagined they'd be, and going to the gym becomes the highlight of their day. Their energy becomes contagious, and others want to join them.



About the Author:

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Courtesy of Adrian Reyes

When athletes get the results they're looking for, their energy becomes contagious and others want to join them.