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Fair-Trade Fitness?

Bartering seems like a great idea, but many affiliate owners warn that caution is required if you want to avoid trading a well-fed pig for an emaciated chicken.

By Emily Beers

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Mike Warkentin/CrossFit Journal

When it comes to philosophies about bartering, affiliate owners are all over the map. And so is their bartering. Some do it all the time and have never had a bad experience, while others are more cautious.

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One affiliate owner admitted to bartering his coaching services for everything under the sun: a deck, a fence, a home sound system and construction work by a handyman. Similarly, others have bartered for mechanical work on their vehicles, a remodeled kitchen, advertising, printing services, power washing, computers, food products and even 1,000 lb. of dumbbells.

Services were swapped for sand for a volleyball court in one odd deal, while more common arrangements include chiropractic or massage sessions, as well as gym equipment such as plyometric boxes and rigs.

While some trades go well, others fail. Experienced affiliate owners agree that successful bartering requires a clearly defined arrangement in which the right people trade the right products and services.

The Right People

The most common trade seems to be bartering for cleaning services.

Joshua Godfrey of CrossFit Grace in Boiling Springs, South Carolina, regrets ever having traded a membership for cleaning services at his gym. Godfrey used to clean his gym himself after each class and after each day, and he'd do more detailed cleaning on the weekends.

"But my wife and I needed a break from having to thoroughly clean the place weekly. We have a 1-year-old, and that time was valuable family time to us," Godfrey said of why he started to seek a new cleaning option.

"So we bartered with a young college student who struggled with money. He actually approached us about cleaning the gym," Godfrey said.

Godfrey didn't know the student well, but it seemed like a good opportunity. The student agreed to clean the gym twice a month and would receive 50 percent off his monthly membership in return.

The student cleaned one weekend and did a good job, but Godfrey said the work took much longer than it should have. And when it came time to pay his reduced membership fee, the student procrastinated. Godfrey reminded him a couple of times but was only given excuses.

Although the student never cleaned again and never paid his fee, he continued attending classes for a while until he eventually stopped coming altogether. For Godfrey, the



Courtesy of Joshua Godfrey

Joshua Godfrey, his wife and child had to resume their cleaning duties after a barter-gone-bad at CrossFit Grace.

attempt at bartering was more of a temporary annoyance than a huge loss, but the experience left a sour taste in his mouth.

"Although this bartering example gone wrong isn't that bad and could have been much worse, we did learn some things from this situation," Godfrey said. "We learned to be very careful when making agreements with anyone."

"My biggest advice to those considering bartering is to be careful who you are bartering with."

—Joshua Godfrey



Courtesy of Brian Costello

Affiliate owner Brian Costello (left) recommends specifying exact terms when bartering.

In Manhattan, Kansas, Christina Spencer of Junction City CrossFit had a much better experience bartering for cleaning services. The client who cleans the affiliate is a longtime member, a mother of two and the wife of a soldier, so the family appreciates any cash savings. For Spencer, this trusted female client was the perfect candidate.

“She comes in three days a week to clean. She gets unlimited membership in return,” Spencer said, adding that she has a similar deal in place with another longtime member, who helps with billing and paperwork. Both arrangements are working well and help Spencer’s business stay clean and organized.

After learning his lesson with the struggling student, Godfrey now agrees with Spencer’s approach: Only barter with members with whom you have a solid relationship.

“We have people with different skills, backgrounds and connections that can be very useful to us, and it gives those particular members a sense of contribution to their gym,” said Godfrey, who has traded with members for construction of boxes and rigs, as well as for graphic design and marketing help.

“My biggest advice to those considering bartering is to be careful who you are bartering with, what you are bartering for, and don’t put yourself into a position where you are assuming all the risk,” he said.

The Right Agreement

Without a clear bartering agreement, the following situation has arisen at more than a handful of affiliates:

One of your members agrees to clean the gym or take pictures for your Facebook page in exchange for his monthly membership dues. Then one month, he becomes unexpectedly busy at work for three weeks and only shows up for one workout. And because he hasn’t used his membership much, he figures he doesn’t need to clean or take pictures until he returns to the gym on a more regular basis. He doesn’t communicate, leaving you with a dirty gym or a bland Facebook page. Ultimately, you’re left high and dry.

Because of this pitfall, Brian Costello of CrossFit Long Island in Yaphank, New York, avoids bartering as much as possible. He suggests that if you do choose to barter, make sure you are specific about the terms. It’s easier if you’re trading something like a month of group classes for three

plyometric boxes. It's tougher when you're trading for things such as cleaning services and website upkeep, as it's harder to know exactly how many hours of work these services will require.

And when something feels wrong and you sense you're getting the bad end of a trade, confronting the person is never fun or easy, Costello explained.

"If the client isn't holding up their end of the bargain, it puts me in a tough situation," he said. "I would feel uncomfortable speaking to them like an employee or demanding better service."

He added: "Of course, very clear guidelines and expectations can prevent (negative outcomes), but in my experience barterers are usually more informal."

Some affiliate owners use contracts to make everything crystal clear. But most times, owners and clients are friends, and it can feel weird and awkward—like you're drafting a prenuptial agreement—when you hand someone you trust a piece of paper to ensure he'll show up twice a week to scrub your toilets and wipe down your pull-up bars. But

even if a friendship is in place, it's still important that both parties know exactly what's expected.

Because of these difficulties, and because Costello believes valuable services shouldn't be discounted, he generally shies away from most trades.

"I like people to respect my prices and service, so I try to show the same respect for them," Costello explained. "I like to think my service is professional, unique and fairly priced. If one of my clients provides a service, they probably feel the same way."

Recently, Costello had the opportunity to barter with one of his coaches to take professional photos for his website. But he chose not to.

"The first thing I asked her is what she normally charges for this service, and that's what I will pay. I'm sure it's fair, and I want to see her business succeed," he said.

The Right Deal

Jeff Licciardi of CrossFit Amoskeag in Bedford, New Hampshire, has found a way to make bartering work. "I do



Courtesy of Jeff Licciardi

Jeff Licciardi of CrossFit Amoskeag (center, in orange) restricts his trades to services that will directly aid the development of his business.

it a lot more than I realize," he said, referring to trades for anything from construction to cleaning.

The key for him is to keep trades strictly related to the development of his business. He's heard of other owners trading for personal luxuries such as haircuts and home renovations, but this isn't his approach. If it makes his gym function better, he's into it. If it provides better service to his members, he's into it. If it will help his business grow, he's into it.

"I keep it to stuff directly related to members and the facility," Licciardi said.

Like many box owners, Licciardi bartered for painting as well as flooring when he was building his gym.

"Anyone who did a tremendous amount of work, I gave them a certain amount of free classes—six months of classes—and it worked out really well," he said. "It was all people I knew."

Recently, Licciardi became acquainted with a group of strongman competitors who wanted to both store their equipment and train at his gym. He decided to allow it if the athletes opened up their training and equipment to his current members.

"It's working out great. We're kind of a big stay-at-home-mom gym. The 9-a.m. class is packed after the moms drop their kids off at school. So I was kind of surprised how many people showed up to throw stones around," Licciardi said.

Licciardi also barter with a local radio station.

Instead of paying for advertising, Licciardi is putting one of the on-air radio personalities through a long-term fitness challenge. In return, the talk-show host explains how CrossFit is helping him. Licciardi will also get a chance to go on air and talk about his business in the upcoming months.

For Licciardi, bartering doesn't have to be about trading a service for a service. Most recently, he called a Lululemon store in an attempt to forge a business relationship.

"They're going to pack up their store one night and open it in our gym, and in exchange we'll get a percentage of revenue of their sales," he said.

For Licciardi, bartering is as much about creating healthy partnership agreements with quality people as it is about receiving something specific. Ultimately, he wants to create potential growth for his business and community.



Courtesy of Joe Vaughn

Coach Steve Hicks spots an athlete at CrossFit Mousetrap. Owner Joe Vaughn utilizes a reimbursement method when he barter with clients, which gives him leverage if someone doesn't deliver.

Insuring the Deal

Joe Vaughn of CrossFit Mousetrap in Orlando, Florida, has another tip for bartering.

“Use a reimbursement method,” he suggested. This method means the person will pay his or her bills up front, and Vaughn will reimburse the client at the end of the month if all goods and services are delivered as agreed upon.

He explained this provides additional leverage for the business owner if the other person doesn't hold up his or her end of the deal. For added insurance, Vaughn also makes those he reimburses sign a contract.

Currently, Vaughn employs this tactic with two intern coaches whose duties involve helping out with 15 classes a month in return for a membership. Not only does the agreement help the interns pay for their memberships, but it also helps classes run smoothly because there's a second set of eyes on the floor. And the system is easy to reverse if it's not working out.

“If a person decides coaching isn't for them, it's easy to transition them back into being a regular member,” Vaughn said.

He does the same thing with a massage therapist who provides one massage service per week for a membership.

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**—Joe Vaughn on reimbursement
methods of bartering**

Like others, Vaughn learned about bartering the hard way. He once traded a membership with a college student who agreed to clean the gym. The story is a familiar one:

“I gave her a key. She cleaned the gym around her schedule. Soon, she started not doing a great job and ended up not showing up after a month-and-a-half,” he said. “That's a big problem, because now this person is out there in the world with a key to the gym.”

Vaughn's reimbursement method, on the other hand, ensures quality of service, and he believes it also motivates the person more. The intern coach knows he has to help with 15 classes each month, and if the massage therapist has to cancel, she knows she won't get 100 percent reimbursement.

“It's about the psychology. When that charge goes through their account every month, it motivates them to hold up their end of the deal,” Vaughn said.

“Let's Make a (Good) Deal”

Whether you barter regularly or only rarely, it's important to avoid the pitfalls.

Affiliate owners agree problems can be avoided when the following template is implemented: Barter with the right people, use the right agreement, and define the right products and services.

When done poorly, bartering can create ill will and financial problems. When done correctly, it can be wonderful for your members, your business and your community at large.



About the Author

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