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# BROKEN WINDOWS, BROKEN AFFILIATE?

BY DAVID ISRAEL AND BARRY NAPIER

DAVID ISRAEL AND BARRY NAPIER OF CROSSFIT FELIX EXPLAIN HOW LITTLE THINGS CAN MAKE OR BREAK YOUR BUSINESS.



Henry House

David Israel and Barry Napier advise that attention to detail—or lack thereof—also speaks to your coaching.

Have you ever seen the number of potential members at your box dwindle? Does your membership seem to bump up against an invisible barrier?

If so, you might be suffering from the broken-window effect.

When CrossFit Felix opened its doors on April 5, 2014, things felt right. From the banners on the wall to the placement of the rowers, the bar racks, the color-coded Dynamax balls, the clean lines of the kettlebells, the gym seemed to beckon people inward.

About nine months later, we hit 154 members. Our one-year growth goal: 200 members.

No Groupon. No Living Social. No massive social-media campaigns or huge advertising budget.

Meanwhile, there are 11 other CrossFit affiliates within a 3-mile radius. Five of those gyms are less than a mile away from CrossFit Felix.

What's the secret? It relates to the broken-window theory, first tested by Stanford University psychologist [Philip Zimbardo](#) in 1969 and later described by George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson in a 1982 Atlantic Monthly article titled "[Broken Windows](#)." The theory is based on a widely used example:

"Consider a building with a few broken windows. If the windows are not repaired, the tendency is for vandals to break a few more windows. Eventually, they may even break into the building, and if it's unoccupied, perhaps become squatters or light fires inside.

"Or consider a sidewalk. Some litter accumulates. Soon, more litter accumulates. Eventually, people even start leaving bags of trash from take-out restaurants there or even break into cars."

**HERE'S THE THING: MANY GYMS ARE GUILTY OF CREATING PROVERBIAL BROKEN WINDOWS. YOU CAN SEE THEM IF YOU KNOW WHAT TO LOOK FOR.**

It's a social-science theory that attempts to explain why criminal activity is generally found in disreputable areas. Not to say you can't get mugged in front of a police station. You can. It's just that dirty, vandalized, disorganized, unlit areas tend to draw unsavory characters like a magnet.

This isn't necessarily a conscious thing. There's a bit of a universal law at work here, such as like attracts like. Criminal activity happens in places where it's easier to commit a crime. If it's dank, dirty, disorganized, dingy and disreputable, chances are you don't want to be there after dark.

Here's the thing: Many gyms are guilty of creating proverbial broken windows. You can see them if you know what to look for. Walk into an unkempt gym with fresh, open eyes. What might you see? Perhaps a dangerous disregard for details: bumper plates stacked haphazardly, chalk dust on the floor, barbells bundled up in corners like pick-up sticks, banners strewn across the walls, mismatched equipment from multiple vendors, medicine balls randomly stacked on a ramshackle shelf.

In short, you might see broken windows everywhere. Those messy details can trigger a subconscious response in some people's minds.

Even though clients might not directly see the broken windows—or, more importantly, don't know they see them—we believe the subconscious feeling regarding attention to detail directly correlates to our attention to detail about training our members. Take your living room, for example. If it's clean, people might or might not notice. If it's dirty, everyone notices. Same with your gym. People might or might not notice if your affiliate is clean or even if your coaching is amazing. But if your place is dirty, and, in turn, your coaching is poor, everyone notices.

**WE BELIEVE THE SUBCONSCIOUS FEELING REGARDING ATTENTION TO DETAIL DIRECTLY CORRELATES TO OUR ATTENTION TO DETAIL ABOUT TRAINING OUR MEMBERS.**

Everything in our industry is linked. It's just like going out to dinner. If the service was amazing but the food was terrible, you'll probably never go back. If the food was amazing but the waiter was a jerk, you'll also probably never go back. Same thing



What are prospective members' first impressions when they walk through the doors of your affiliate?

goes for your box. If the coaching is wonderful but the place is dirty or poorly kept, an athlete might never come back. If the place is sparkling clean and well organized but the coaching falls short, the athlete also might never come back. Most people only remember bad experiences.

The problem is compounded because no one is going to tell you your gym suffers from broken windows; many won't consciously recognize the problem. Instead, it will manifest itself as a feeling about the gym that can directly affect people's willingness to become members or keep showing up to classes.



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A good atmosphere can help motivate and retain clients, while subtle deficiencies can create bad vibes that come to characterize a business and limit its success.

How to discover and repair broken windows:

**1** Do a walk-through. Start outside your gym. Ask yourself, "What do I see that is messy, disorganized, dirty, misplaced or that draws my eye in an unpleasing way?" Be brutally honest with yourself as you walk through the front door. Stop. Look around. Take a quick visual scan, then slowly survey your box. What do you see? What stands out? Look for the flaws. See the shit spilling out of a box in the corner. See members' gear piled high and strewn across the floor. Continue moving through all customer-facing areas of your gym. Keep the tally going. Sweat the small stuff, as well as the big stuff. Look at your banners. Are they aligned with other banners? Do they fill exact dimensions on the wall? Have they been hung with intention and care?

**2** Make a decision to raise your standards. Now that you've faced reality, it's time to decide what you'll do about it. It's not enough to fix everything. You have to do something radical. You must raise your standards and become the gold standard. This is your crown jewel. This gym represents the absolute highest level of excellence. You, your team and your gym must be outstanding. Create the vision for yourself about how you want your gym to look. It isn't about how much money you can spend. Instead, recognize that your vision and your commitment to sustaining that vision will be the most important factors.

**3** Raise the standards for your team by sharing your decision. One idea is to take each of your staff members on a walk through the gym. Ask them what they see, help them find the broken windows, get them to point out the problems. There are numerous ways to get buy-in from your staff, but it will always come back to the strength in your conviction and how high you set the standard. Create a shared vision of how the gym can look and feel. Ask for their commitment to meet or exceed the new standard. Bottom line: People want to be proud of where they work. If you step up, so will your staff.

**4** Get obsessed by finding at least three qualities each day you or your staff improved. By recognizing progress, you'll inspire yourself and others to keep taking action. If you become a nagging, irritating bitch, chances are your staff will resentfully comply instead of proudly improving the gym at every opportunity. Gradually, your positive obsession can create a culture of continuous improvement and hardwire habits for staff and members alike. In this way, the gym's level of excellence becomes self-maintaining.



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Once a culture of continuous improvement and virtuosity is in place, great things happen daily.

In 2011 in the video "How Clean Is Your Bathroom?" CrossFit Inc. Founder and CEO Greg Glassman noted that running a successful affiliate is more than perfectly demonstrating clean technique.

"When I go into the gym and see a dirty bathroom, what I see is that you don't give a fuck," he said. "And that's fatal."

Your gym's ability to demonstrate excellence and attract new members is entirely up to you. Raise your standards, clean up the inside and watch your business flourish. ■

## About the Authors

David "Izzy" Israel owns CrossFit Felix in Washington state. Barry Napier is a coach at CrossFit Felix.