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“I WANT TO BE YOUR TRAINER”

CrossFit coaches talk about building relationships that result in new clients.

BY EMILY BEERS



Fit as she might be, Jamie Hagiya finds communication skills are more important when it comes to impressing prospective clients.

Like all high-level CrossFit athletes, Jamie Hagiya has an impressive physique. The epitome of health and fitness, she's the perfect poster girl to attract new clients into the gym, right?

Not so fast, said 31-year-old Hagiya, who finished 18th at the 2016 Reebok CrossFit Games. The owner of Torrance CrossFit in California said she goes out of her way to avoid using her fitness resume as a sales pitch.

"That's not what will get new people into the gym," she said.

According to Dan Uyemura, Hagiya's business partner, her humble approach works and she has a gift for bringing in new clients.

"People approach her in the world all the time," Uyemura said. And when they do, Hagiya is the coach who can walk into a coffee shop and leave with five clients, he added.

"That actually just happened the other day," Hagiya said. "I went to the dermatologist and the woman at the front desk asked me where I work out. She said she had been wanting to try CrossFit for a while."

After the receptionist expressed interest, Hagiya turned the tables and immediately started asking the woman questions.

"When I meet someone who's interested in coming into the gym, I actually don't talk about myself at all," Hagiya said. "Sales is more about listening than anything. Asking questions and genuinely listening to their answers, that's how you build trust."

After Hagiya built rapport with the receptionist at her doctor's office, the two exchanged phone numbers, and the following week the woman showed up at Torrance CrossFit for an introductory session with six of her friends. Hagiya earned herself seven new clients that day.

Beyond the Workout

Hagiya said she thinks CrossFit coaches make a mistake by talking too much about the physical side of CrossFit when trying to convert prospects into clients.

It's hard to refrain from focusing on the fitness gains clients will achieve because we know how powerful CrossFit workouts are, Hagiya said, but she started having more success the moment she shifted her focus to why the client really wants to get fit. She credits the change in approach to a sales course she took while in Cancun, Mexico, when she was working for Battlefrog, an obstacle-course-race company.

"It changed the way I talked to people about coming into the gym. I used to be like, 'This is what CrossFit is. These are the gymnastics movements we'll teach you. This is when the classes are. These are the classes we offer.' And I would go on and on about it," Hagiya said.

Video: [Greg Glassman on Explaining CrossFit to Clients](#)



Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

Win friends, influence people with a smile.

Joe Vaughn, the owner of CrossFit MouseTrap in Orlando, Florida, takes a similar approach. The technical cues aren't going to sell a new client, he said.

"When someone comes in and they're brand new, many coaches try to over-coach them to impress them with their knowledge. But that doesn't provide a good experience. When people walk through the door, they're not going to remember the cue you gave them. They'll remember the way you made them feel."

Vaughn said his single biggest focus is making the client feel good.

"Sometimes I do things like count the number of times a person smiles (during the first experience)," he said. "Because the best way to make a sale is to give someone a good experience."

To give prospective clients a good experience, Hagiya said it's important to dig deep to get people to open up "so you understand where they're coming from."

She added: "If they say they want to lose weight, I'll ask a question like, 'Why do you want to lose 10 lb.?' I think if you get to the



William Albritton (second from left) uses media to connect with people before they enter the gym.



Joe Vaughn said he'll sometimes count a client's smiles to ensure he or she is having fun.

root of their problems, to their internal reasoning for getting into the gym, you're more likely to (get them to join). And if you're really genuine, they'll be able to tell that you care and then they usually open up a bit more."

"I explain how fitness has been my gateway to personal development and to acceptance of who I am."
— Fernando Alcantara

Fernando Alcantara, a coach at CrossFit Long Beach in California, is another trainer who has found success getting personal with prospects.

"If someone shows interest in the gym, I will mention that I help people like the person I'm talking to. I will try to find out who the person is and what kind of problems or challenges (he or she has), and I will tailor what I do specifically to that person," Alcantara said. "I get them talking about themselves. I try to find out some 'pain points' from that person."

By "pain points," Alcantara said he means the person's true reasons for wanting help. People might say they want to lose weight or get fit, but that doesn't give you their reasons for setting these goals.

"The why is the important part."

Getting to the root of the problem is not always as easy as it sounds, he said.

"Sometimes it takes a while to get someone to open up and be vulnerable and truly let you in on why they want to be there. Sometimes it's really personal. Or they're embarrassed."

Alcantara recently encountered a situation like this with a female prospect who made contact through his website. The two talked on the phone and she seemed standoffish, he explained.

"So I said, 'What if we met in person and talked and got to know each other?'" Alcantara said. "She came in and we sat down together without any distractions, without anyone else listening in, and she started to trust me."

She soon opened up about her pain.

"She was a slender girl, but she didn't like how she looked. She hated knowing she could look better but does nothing about it. Her pain was that she knew she could do it but didn't ever do anything about it. She was embarrassed by this."



Courtesy of Fernando Alcantara

Fernando Alcantara

After their conversation, the young woman signed up to train at CrossFit Long Beach.

Alcantara admitted some people are more difficult than others. When he senses a roadblock from a prospect, he isn't afraid to share a story of his own to try to "break the ice," he said.

"I'm 5'6" and I used to weigh 240 lb. I actually stopped weighing myself at 240 lb. Now I'm 165 lb. I used to completely hate myself when I was overweight.

"So I tell them this and about my journey, how I was in a place where I was never happy with myself and always wanted to be someone else, and I explain how fitness has been my gateway to personal development and to acceptance of who I am," he said.

He added: "Often people come in and see fitness coaches as people who don't struggle at all with fitness or nutrition. They think we're somehow above that, so when I tell a story that paints me in a vulnerable way, it makes them know I'm human. When people aren't being open and forthcoming, usually they just need someone to relate to."

If a prospect still doesn't open up after Alcantara shares his story, he said it's time to ask the tough questions. He credits his experience working as a journalist at the Garden Grove Journal with helping him feel comfortable asking questions that might make the prospect momentarily uncomfortable. Alcantara spent two years interviewing politicians, so he's prepared to ask the questions he knows are necessary to connect with the prospective client.

"I put on the journalist hat and say to myself, 'If I'm going to lose them anyway, I might as well try.' If I lose them because I asked the hard questions, that's OK. If I fail, at least I know I asked," he said.

Never Mind the Money

Although both Hagiya and Alcantara agree the focus of working with prospective clients should be on discovering their wants and needs, at some point the prospect has to make the decision whether or not to pull out the wallet.

“It’s tough because we are trying to help people, but nothing comes for free and we also don’t want to waste our time as coaches,” Hagiya said.

She said she thinks many coaches make a mistake by assuming the prospect is going to think joining the gym is too costly.

“One thing I have learned is never assume something is too expensive for people. You don’t know their financial situation, and they might even be offended if you assume they can’t afford it,” Hagiya said.

Hagiya’s gym doesn’t list prices on its website because the hope is to show the client value before the talk about cost of training.

“We tried different things and found we have more success when we reveal the cost after we show the client the value of what we do,” she said. “The people you really want there will find a way to pay for it. I’ve had people come in who said they saved up for three months so they could join. The people who choose to spend money on their fitness see the value and find a way.”

Hagiya has also discovered she isn’t a good fit with those who don’t see the value in the training.

“The people who want a deal or a discount are always the first ones to quit. And if they do want a deal, I’ll be honest and say, ‘My buddy owns a gym down the street. It’s a bit cheaper if price is your Number 1 concern here.’”

Vaughn takes a different approach.

“We go (for) transparency. We have our prices listed on our website. That pre-screens people, and if they can’t afford it, we don’t want to waste our time,” Vaughn said.

For Alcantara, the key has been realizing he doesn’t need to sell everyone who comes through the door for an introductory session.

“Yes, you want to pick up a new client, but it’s as important for you to find people you want to work with, too,” he said. “I’m not afraid to have someone not be right for me. I’d rather find out early on if we’re not a right fit.”

The latter is something Alcantara learned from a 2015 sales-training course hosted by long-time sales coach Greg Mack, a man who has more than 25 years of experience working with gym owners to increase their sales.

Mack’s—and now Alcantara’s—approach to picking up new clients is natural selection. It’s not about bombarding people and



For Alcantara (left) and Albritton (coral shorts, right), it’s critical that prospective clients trust them and their brand.

shoving a flyer in their face as they enter the grocery store, Mack explained. It’s about finding the right people who are happy to pay for your service, he added.

In this way, selling a product or service doesn’t have to feel devious, Mack said.

“Your focus as a coach should be on finding out if you can meet (the prospect’s) needs. And if you can’t, then you shouldn’t take their money.”

Building Trust

William Albritton is the owner of CrossFit Alexandria in Louisiana.

Like Hagiya and Alcantara, Albritton focuses on developing trust with a prospective client. For him, this starts online.

Albritton said he’s been doing what CrossFit Inc. did in its early days to build the brand: Post useful information and videos online.

“This helps people get to know and trust your brand because you’re giving them value,” Albritton said.

The key for him has been finding a way to reach the right market: regular people who are looking to get fit, he said.

“We put out videos with training and nutrition tips that ordinary people can relate to—things like how to gain muscle or how to lose weight,” he said. “The general public doesn’t know anything about Olympic weightlifting, but they might be interested in weight loss, so we focus on areas that will resonate with them.



It’s about using the language they’re speaking. A lot of CrossFit gyms want to look cool and showcase their competitors, so they put up videos of heavy clean and jerks and snatches, and this can scare some people away.”

Albritton has had success with direct advertising that targets specific groups of people; for example, friends of people who already like the CrossFit Alexandria Facebook page.

“It acts as a screening process because these people’s friends already trust us,” Albritton said.

“More and more often these days, people who sign up tell me they have already watched our videos and were learning the movements on their own before they came in.”
—William Albritton

His main goal is to build CrossFit Alexandria into a familiar brand in his local market, he said.

So far, it’s working. Albritton said he regularly meets people

around the city who see his CrossFit Alexandria T-shirt and tell him they’ve seen his videos.

“Or they’ll tell me they’ve been eating better since seeing our nutrition tip video. More and more often these days, people who sign up tell me they have already watched our videos and were learning the movements on their own before they came in,” he said.

This free content adds immediate value that a general ad cannot.

“Warming up leads before they come in is key. ... A lot of gym owners look for a quick solution and a quick conversion. So they do something like run a Facebook ad saying, ‘Come sign up,’ but that’s all they do. They never warm their audience up with value first,” he explained.

Warming leads goes back to the CrossFit ideal of excellence. By showcasing themselves and their business, trainers attract clients who are impressed with their knowledge, competence and professionalism. A prospective client who is already impressed before speaking to a coach is much more likely to want to work with that coach, and if the trainer earns the visitor’s trust when they first meet or speak, the relationship is likely going to be successful.

“We might also run an ad to bring new people in, but we’ve also had 10 other videos that they’ve already seen, so there’s already a familiarity there. It makes converting them (into clients) a lot easier.”

Natural Selection

Though their approaches differ slightly, Albritton, Alcantara, Hagiya and Vaughn all agree that being pushy and aggressive isn’t the way to a new client’s heart.

“I’m not trying to trick people into doing something they don’t want. Sometimes I just talk to people for a while first before I even mention I own a gym down the street,” Hagiya said. “It needs to come from them.”

Albritton takes the same approach: “Let it happen naturally. We work really hard on putting up our free, valuable content, and since we’re doing that we don’t ever have to worry about being pushy or ‘salesy.’”

For Vaughn, sometimes it happens naturally when he least expects it, such as one time he was out drinking at a bar and started chatting to the guy next to him at 1 a.m.

“We talked for a while and he said he was going to come to the 9-a.m. class the next day, and I was like, ‘There’s no way you’re coming.’ But we had built a good rapport between us, and sure enough, he came in the next morning, did the class and signed up for a membership.”



As with Vaughn's 1-a.m. drinking buddy and unlikely new client, Alcantara has discovered when you let people come to you, they end up becoming great clients who stick around.

"They're the ones who trust me as a coach. They know I want the best for them and I'm not just trying to sell them things they don't need." ■

About the Author: Emily Beers is a CrossFit Journal contributor and coach at [CrossFit Vancouver](#). She finished 37th at the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games.

"Asking questions and genuinely listening to the answers, that's how you build trust."
—Jamie Hagiya