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Welcome to the Fold

CrossFit affiliates have many options for integrating new members.
Emily Beers talks to five gym owners who explain what they do and why.

By Emily Beers

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Courtesy of CrossFit Strongtown

CrossFit affiliate owners are free to run their businesses any way they like as they pursue excellence and bring fitness to their clients.

They can make their own decisions as to how they integrate new clients into the gym, whether they're going to offer specialty programs, how they'll develop and compensate coaches, how much they're going to charge, what hours they'll be open, whether they'll install showers and so on.

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CrossFit's "least rents" model of affiliation is the entrepreneur's dream, where a gym owner pays a relatively low annual fee (\$3,000 for most gyms) for the use of the CrossFit name but is free to run the business as he or she sees fit. In more than 6,000 businesses around the world, affiliate owners are taking advantage of the opportunity to decide for themselves what works best, and the result is a constantly growing community of healthy people and businesses.

This series looks at the business of running a CrossFit box and examines what different CrossFit affiliates are doing to create excellence in their clients, their coaches and ultimately their gyms. The affiliates in this series have been around for some time and have implemented the results of successful experiments and learned from the things that didn't work. Interestingly, different affiliates are having similar levels of success with opposite approaches.

The first installment in this series looks at three contrasting ways to integrate new clients and keep them around for the long haul.

Will these approaches work for your gym? That's for you to decide.

In With the New

New clients: Do you put them right into group classes? Do you host beginner classes? On-ramp programs? Group fundamentals classes? One-on-one personal training? How much do you charge them? The list of questions goes on.

Dan MacDougald from CrossFit Atlanta; Marc Wheeler from CrossFit StPete in Florida; Alex Cibiri from Element CrossFit in Mississauga, Ont.; Robert Sax from CrossFit Amped in Bellevue, Wash.; and Dan Gallagher from CrossFit Strongtown in Connecticut have completely different ideas about how to bring new clients into CrossFit.

While MacDougald emphasizes one-on-one personal training to teach new clients the movements—charging them premium prices for a personal coach—Gallagher keeps his entry-level classes easy and affordable in order to bring in as many people as possible.

On their end, Wheeler and Cibiri opt for a short fundamentals period followed by an open-gym model without scheduled group classes at all, while Sax's model falls more in line with CrossFit Atlanta: charge more money for a longer, in-depth introduction period. He even gets some clients to pass a test before they graduate to group classes.

While all of these approaches look dramatically different from each other, all five of these affiliate owners have

created flourishing communities with fit, happy and healthy clients and coaches.

Up Close and Personal

After years of trial and error, MacDougald, a former defense attorney, is convinced that the best way to intake new clients is to charge them premium prices and put them through 10 to 15 one-on-one personal-training sessions—sessions cost \$500 for 10.

Once clients are competent in the movements and have a base level of fitness, they are graduated to group classes, which has almost become a rite of passage.

MacDougald didn't always do it this way. At first CrossFit Atlanta had a free trial session on Sunday and then put new athletes right into group classes. He reported that it didn't work for his affiliate and increased the stress on his coaches. Retention wasn't great either, he said. But since implementing personal-training intros at CrossFit Atlanta, he believes all the pieces of the excellence puzzle are now in line: client excellence, coach excellence and affiliate health.



Kim Bellavance Photograph

Some affiliates require all new members to go through one-on-one sessions before graduating to group classes.



Some gym owners report the connection forged during one-on-one intro sessions endures long after the athlete has graduated to group classes.

MacDougald explained that one of the best outcomes of personal training has been improved client retention. He attributes this largely to the fact that his classes run more smoothly now. The reason for this is two-fold. For one, clients who attend group classes have been through 10 to 15 personal-training sessions, so their knowledge of the CrossFit movements is greater and they don't require as much handholding by the coach during group classes.

Secondly, MacDougald's coaches don't have to spend disproportionate energy on the newbie while spending less time with the veterans.

"There's less disruption and less wasted time," MacDougald said.

Another reason he believes personal training has helped retention is because it gives coaches a chance to really connect with their clients, to find out their personal goals, and, perhaps more importantly, to find out what's going on in their lives.

Damon Mosely, a coach at CrossFit Atlanta, said the personal sessions are great from the trainer's perspective, too.

MacDougald believes personal training has helped retention because it gives coaches a chance to connect with clients.

"As a coach, personal training allows you to find different people's struggles," he said. "No two people are alike. Some move well, some don't get it, and when you come across someone who is struggling, you're forced to go into your bag of tricks and make them better. It challenges you every time."

Once clients graduate to class, their coach remains their personal coach for life. And their personal coach is compensated financially by being given a percentage of each client's monthly fees for group classes. This ultimately means MacDougald's coaches are incentivized to retain their personal clients. Having more clients results in greater financial compensation.

In short, retention is up in Atlanta because confident clients who have personal relationships with their coaches are likely to be loyal and stick around for the long haul, reaching their fitness goals in the process.

And the final piece of the retention puzzle has to do with MacDougald's belief that making people earn things the hard way results in greater appreciation and satisfaction.

Thus, paying a premium for a great service, where a client receives one-on-one care for 10 to 15 hours, and where he has to work his butt off in order to reach a certain level of fitness before graduating to group classes, leads to clients who are more invested than they would be had it come easily.

Free-Range CrossFit

Both Wheeler and Cibiri have a different way of cultivating loyal clients and happy communities.

Wheeler runs a foundations program for new members. It's made up of six one-on-one training sessions where members get introduced to all the main CrossFit movements. Unlike MacDougald, who prides himself on being the most expensive steakhouse in town, Wheeler's foundations program is included as part of the client's monthly fee.

Wheeler kept the price low for a reason, and it's working for him.

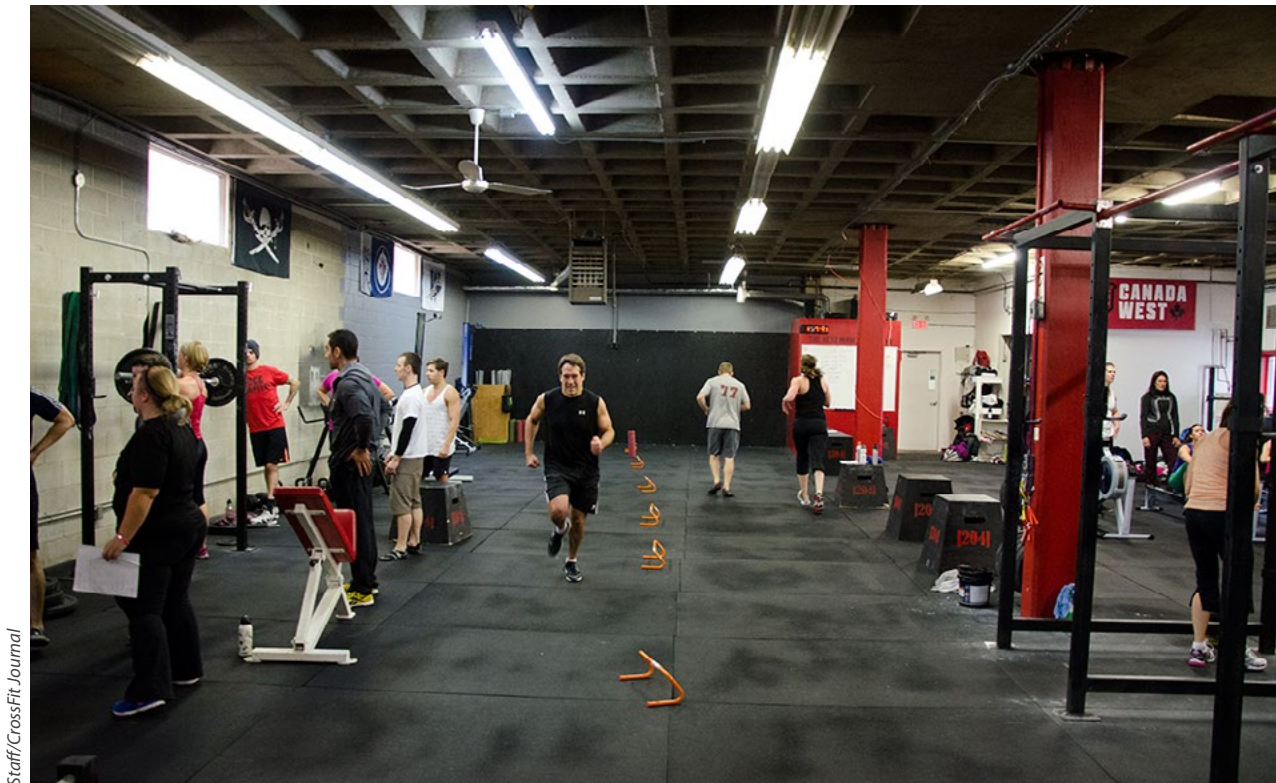
"I want to get in as many people as possible ... It makes it easier for people to sign up this way," he said. He's found that since adding this program two years ago, his revenue has skyrocketed.

Cibiri of Element CrossFit runs a similar on-ramp program in that he doesn't charge a lot for athletes to get started in CrossFit. His on-ramp, which is run in a small group, costs \$100 for two weeks of intro classes that are held in the evenings.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

In group on-ramp classes, members have a chance to bond with other new CrossFit athletes.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

In the open-gym model, clients work out on their own schedule under the watchful eye of trainers.

Cibiri's philosophy is similar to Wheeler's: "Honestly, for us, we just want to get people in to sort of try it. We want them to get a feel for it first," he said of why he keeps his prices low.

At CrossFit StPete, foundations programs are included as part of the client's monthly fee.

Why Wheeler and Cibiri feel their systems really work is because of what happens after clients finish their intro sessions. Unlike MacDougald, who graduates his clients to group classes once they reach a certain fitness level, neither Wheeler nor Cibiri runs official group classes. They opt instead for an open-gym model.

Cibiri explained: "There's a misconception with the term 'open gym' sometimes. People tend to think we just have people coming in and doing their own thing without getting coached. This isn't the case."

In fact, Cibiri believes clients get more coaching in his system than in the normal group-class model. Wheeler, whose Florida box has 225 members, agrees.

"There are two or three trainers on the floor at all times, and we keep a clock that runs all day. When an athlete shows up, they do the warm-up and mobility on their own, and when they're ready to do the workout on the whiteboard, they let a trainer know, and they start the workout at the top of the next minute," said Wheeler, who has three full-time and six part-time coaches.

"So it's not just one person coaching 25 people," Wheeler explained. "And it allows the coaches to roam and focus on who needs the most help As coaches, we like it better than class time. It tends to allow for more one-on-one attention," he said.

Cibiri's model looks similar. He divides his box into three sections during open-gym times. About 2,000 square

feet is dedicated to a warm-up area, while another 2,000 square feet is for strength or lifting, and 3,000 square feet is reserved for the met-con of the day.

"There's usually one trainer in each area, and people cycle through as they see fit," Cibiri said. "We can run way more people through in an hour this way."

He added: "And we try to cycle coaches around during their shift so they don't get bored of teaching the same thing over and over."

One of the main reasons Wheeler and Cibiri think the open-gym model has been so successful for them is because clients can show up at their own convenience. With scheduled hourly classes, if clients are 15 minutes late they usually have to wait for the next class or they rush through warm-up and mobility work to jump into a class that's already in progress.

"For some people who come straight from work, it can be difficult to make a class on time, and when people show up late they're usually waiting around for the next class to start," Wheeler said.

With the open-gym system, a client who arrives at 20 after the hour can just start warming up on his own and hit the workout when he's ready to go.

Wheeler thinks the open-gym model works is because it allows for a more social box.

"I measure my success based on how well my community does. With our model, people spend more time talking and chatting at the end of their workout because they don't have to clear space to make room for the next class," he said. "There's a constant ebb and flow of people, and people tend to hang out longer than just the classic one-hour class model."

As for labor costs, both Wheeler and Cibiri admit it probably costs them more in resources to run their gyms this way, but they feel it's worth it to provide better service.

"It's about the members," Wheeler said.

Jump Right In

Dan Gallagher opened CrossFit Strongtown a year and a half ago, and like most new affiliates, his goal for the first year was simply to get people through the doors.

This means he allows any new recruit to try a class to make sure CrossFit is for him or her.



Courtesy of CrossFit Strongtown

At CrossFit Strongtown, anyone can try a class for free before joining.

"We did try to do more fundamentals for a while, but at first it just seemed to turn people off," Gallagher said. But the group classes got people excited.

**At CrossFit Strongtown,
anyone can come in and try a
class to see if he or she likes it.**

The group environment kept drawing people to the gym, so Gallagher has always maintained that anyone can come in and try a class to see if he or she likes it. And this "soft sell" is working for him.

"Our sales rate is better when we let people try a class first," Gallagher said.

Courtesy of CrossFit Strongtown



Instead of a fundamentals class or one-on-one sessions, CrossFit Strongtown makes sure an extra coach is available to help new members as they learn in a group setting.

The other reason for letting new athletes join classes right away is that Gallagher has found CrossFit is mostly spread through word of mouth. And when a friend of a friend comes in, he usually wants to work out with his friend, and Gallagher's system allows a new athlete to do just that.

"I want them to understand what we do before they join," he added.

Gallagher isn't set in his ways, though. He does have a fundamentals option available for people who aren't so confident in their ability to jump right into classes. These people do one or two introductory sessions prior to joining group classes.

But just because Gallagher lets inexperienced CrossFit athletes join classes right away doesn't mean he isn't concerned about good movement. Over time, Gallagher has developed a way to ensure a new athlete in class gets taken care of properly.

"When we know there's going to be a new person in class, we make sure we have an extra coach in the class who stays with him," he said. "So that coach gives the new athlete a lot of individual attention—the coach is basically assigned to that person for the hour. And sometimes it'll

mean giving them a simpler movement if the workout is more complicated that day."

On top of regular group classes, Gallagher also hosts Olympic-weightlifting sessions and a barbell club at CrossFit Strongtown, both of which are included in his monthly membership fees.

Gallagher's philosophy is simple. He wants to give his clients what they want and not burn holes in their wallets in the process.

"We don't charge extra for fundamentals or Olympic weightlifting or barbell club because we feel like people pay enough to be here," he said.

He added: "We want to make sure the gym and our members are in a good place before we start charging way more."

Overall, Gallagher is happy with where his box has come in just a year and a half. When he opened up, he and his brother, Mike Gallagher, did all the coaching, and they had just 20 members. Today, a year and a half later, Dan has half a dozen coaches and 175 members.



Courtesy of Damon Mosely

Trainer Damon Mosely, judging at the CrossFit Games, is a big fan of one-on-one intro sessions.

Ramping Up

Robert Sax opened CrossFit Amped two years ago. Today, he has more than 250 members.

When he first opened, he didn't run an intake program at all; athletes went right into classes. His goal was just to get people through the door, and he was scared to charge more money for an intro class.

"I thought it might be a deterrent," Sax said.

At the time, he was able to do throw people off the street right into class because his classes weren't busy.

"We were just trying to get people through the doors, and the classes weren't full yet, so I could take the time to diagnose squat mechanics and go over the three pulls in a clean. I had the time in class," he said.

But as classes got busier, things had to change. Sax explained that he grew some balls, started to believe in his business a little more and began charging more money. It was also time to break up the new clients from the veterans.

CrossFit Amped uses a one-month group intro program that cost \$300 for 12 sessions.

This led to his one-month intro session that costs new members \$300 for 12 sessions. Typically, an intro session is a group of 10 to 20 people.

Since implementing his intro class, Sax said both revenue and quality of coaching have gone up.

"You can't make someone perfect in 12 sessions, but at least they get an idea of what the movements are, and they develop proper movement patterns before they join group classes," he said of his intro class.

Sax has a second option for people who can't fit the intro class into their schedule: eight one-on-one personal training sessions for \$400.

He's so intent on good movement that even if someone comes through his doors claiming to have CrossFit experience, Sax puts that person through a rigorous test to make sure the person's movements are up to their standards before releasing the new athlete to group classes.

Sax admitted that asking people for more money had a lot to do with confidence.

"We demand more now. But I know we're worth it We're strict, but we're consistent in our ability to make sure people are safe, and that they have a base knowledge of what they're getting themselves into. By the time they get to group classes, they're walking and talking the CrossFit language," he said.

He added: "In my mind, with our coaches, our gym, our equipment, our community, you're paying for more than just a workout," he said. "It's like buying a car. If I pay for a Mercedes, I expect it to do a little more than a Honda. So you have to ask yourself, 'Is your gym a Mercedes or a Honda?'"



Courtesy of Marc Wheeler

There's no right way to run a CrossFit affiliate, and you'll be able to tell if your method is working by the satisfaction of your members and the success of your business.

Infinite Options

While MacDougald doesn't think it's necessary to train people in a strictly one-on-one environment when they begin CrossFit—if people don't have the money, you can team them up and train them with a friend at a reduced rate, for example—he said having personal training as CrossFit Atlanta's backbone has been nothing short of invaluable for his clients, his business and his coaches. It's led to more committed clients with a sound technical knowledge of CrossFit, smoothly run classes, and better coaches with more free time and energy to give to their clients. This has led to a better affiliate, where everyone is physically, emotionally and financially healthier.

On the other side of the fence, Wheeler in Florida and Cibiri in Ontario have found that low-cost group intros work for them, and they use an open-gym model with no scheduled classes to accommodate busy clients. Unlike the high barrier of entry in the personal-training model, their focus is on bringing more people through the doors.

At CrossFit Strongtown in Connecticut, Gallagher also believes in a lower barrier of entry and has found that immediately exposing new athletes to the group class sells them on CrossFit.

And over in Washington, Sax of CrossFit Amped believes a more in-depth, higher-priced, month-long group fundamentals class is the best way to get new athletes up to speed before graduating them to group classes. Since adding this intake component to CrossFit Amped, he has seen tremendous growth in both numbers and revenue.

Each affiliate owner can make choices and create the perfect model for his or her box.

These four totally different models are producing similarly successful results in all four cities. Wheeler believes this entrepreneurial freedom is the beauty of owning a CrossFit box.

"That's the awesome thing about being an affiliate. Nobody is dictating to you how to run your business," Wheeler said.

With fewer rules, people can make their own choices and create the perfect model for them, their location and their clients.

What's the perfect model for your box?



About the Author

Emily Beers is a *CrossFit Journal* staff writer and editor who finished a master's degree in journalism at the University of Western Ontario in the spring of 2009. Upon graduation, she worked as a sportswriter at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games, where she covered figure skating and short-track speed skating. Currently, she hosts WOD HOG, a not-always-PG publication of the CrossFit Vancouver School of Fitness. She ruptured her Achilles tendon in December 2010 and served as the Canada West Regional Media Director while recovering from surgery. Beers also competed in the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games on CrossFit Vancouver's team. She finished third at the Canada West Regional in 2012.