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An Affiliation Journey—So Far

Chris Saliba affiliated in March of 2009. Just over a year later he looks back on lessons learned and challenges overcome.

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All photos courtesy of Chris Saliba/Coastal CrossFit Queensland

“Hi, Chris: On behalf of CrossFit, we would like to offer our congratulations and to let you know that we would be honored to have you join the CrossFit family of affiliates.”

It was these few words read on March 25, 2009, that started the ball rolling, and as I sit here contemplating this article, I can't believe how quickly time has passed. With the flood of new affiliates joining the CrossFit family, I thought it might be timely to offer a personal journey from Day 1 through to the current time. This article is not intended as a success or failure story but is rather just a personal account of the highs and lows, challenges and rewards that the early stages of affiliation can provide.

From Bootcamp to Garage to Box

It wasn't long into my CrossFit journey that I knew I would affiliate at some stage. I didn't have a set time frame or schedule, but something inside me knew that I must act sooner rather than later. Our location, the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, Australia, had only one other affiliate nearby at the time, and I knew that I would forever kick myself if I didn't get into a virgin market before someone else did.

I visited our local affiliate (CrossFit Sunshine Coast) a couple of times prior to affiliation and each time left with even more enthusiasm and motivation for starting my own box. I had a pretty well-equipped garage gym at home, which mainly served for my own CrossFit training and a bit of personal training here and there, so I was able to take the first step with almost zero risk. There we were: Coastal CrossFit Queensland was officially an affiliate and I started coaching CrossFit in my garage. It was great but still just a small step toward my major goal of opening a large-scale box in the more populated suburb of Kawana on the Sunshine Coast.

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In a year, Chris Saliba went from coaching CrossFit in a garage to training in a full-size box.

There was a hurdle that I had to face before taking the step toward a big box. I already had a successful bootcamp business and would be unable to commit myself totally to either business if I went to a large-scale CrossFit box. I had two choices: fold up my bootcamp business and say goodbye to my income or find another trainer with whom to share the workload. I chose the second option, but finding another trainer to represent your own business is like asking someone else to take care of your children.

Like many fitness businesses, the success of my bootcamp business relied totally on the quality of the training. Up until this point it had just been me, and any successes or failures could only be attributed to me. In my mind, there was only one man for the new training job: an ex-air-force colleague of mine who had a well-paying corporate job for Boeing Australia. How was I going to convince him to quit his secure and lucrative job to come and work for me for

much less money and security? Luckily for me, my friend's shared enthusiasm for all things CrossFit saw him take on the offer as an opportunity to learn the dos and don'ts of opening a new affiliate without the same level of financial commitment as if he was doing it himself.

We found a box of 209 square meters (2,322 square feet) of industrial space in Kawana, a much more populated area of the Sunshine Coast than the one in which we reside. Location was very important to us as CrossFit is in its early stages in Australia, and we knew that we would have a much better chance of success if we chose a central, more populated area. We signed a three-year lease at \$2,200 AUD per month, and we gave ourselves a month to outfit the box. Our official opening was advertised for Aug. 1, 2009, and aside from a few bootcamp clients who had already committed to making the transition, we were starting from scratch.



The Coastal CrossFit Queensland community is growing stronger as more and more Australians are finding out about CrossFit.



Getting the Message Out

It seemed logical to us that after spending so much money on starting up Coastal CrossFit QLD, we should commit a reasonable sum to advertising. We had always had a fairly good response from print advertising with our bootcamps, so we followed the same path. Our response was minimal. A few of my bootcamp clients had seen the ad, and even though they had an awareness of CrossFit, they didn't understand the "constantly varied functional movements performed at high intensity" quote included in the ad. This was disappointing. If people who already had some knowledge of CrossFit didn't get it, then what about the people with no prior knowledge of CrossFit?

We re-worded the ad with more plain English and even went bigger this time. The response: zero. OK, print advertising sucks; let's try radio. We surveyed our bootcamp clients as to which radio station they listened to and booked some advertising with that station. We advertised our opening day, and out of the 40-odd people who turned out for the day, two were as a result of the radio spots.

We had two choices at this stage: stop advertising and potentially watch our business fail or go for a larger campaign of advertising. We wanted to give radio advertising another go and booked 50 spots of advertising over the space of seven days at a cost of \$1,000. Our response: zero. By this stage we were three weeks past opening and had seen minimal growth in numbers. We had spent around \$3,000 in advertising and had yet to see any return. These figures would seem laughable to a big corporation, but for us every \$1,000 wasted represented more kettlebells, barbells, etc. and a bigger hole in our personal savings.

It was at this point that I started to question our actions. I had gone into this enterprise believing that a passion for CrossFit and the will to succeed would be enough to see us prosper. Had I been massively naive? The one thing I was sure of at this stage was that I was not going to, nor could I afford to, waste another cent on advertising. I decided the best thing to do was to concentrate on the foundations of building a good business, at this point believing—and hoping—that it would translate into numbers through the door.

Building Momentum

About four weeks after the opening of the big box, there seemed to be a small shift. A few more people came on board, and they told friends who told friends, and numbers started to grow. First, 10 people training in one day was a milestone, then 15, then 20 and 25. Our first major goal was to break even on a monthly basis. This required 22 people to be signed up for a month at the same point in time. From memory, we achieved this goal at around the six-week mark. OK, so the bank account was not going backward as quickly as before, but we were certainly not ready to go out and buy our first Ferrari.

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CrossFit intensity is the same from North America to Europe to the land Down Under.

The next step we took in the aim of boosting our clients' achievements and satisfaction levels was to start keeping attendance statistics for each and every person. This coincided with setting monthly goals. The benefits of this system were many: it created accountability as each client had to attend training frequently with specific improvements in mind. This also allowed us to keep accurate data on monthly totals, weekly averages and overall percentages for each individual, and it can also act as a first line of defense if a client is not achieving as expected. The system allows us to quickly identify and contact a client who has not trained for an extended period.

Although it may seem complicated, this process was quite easy to implement because we were already posting each client's WOD results on our Web site daily, so all we had to do was create an Excel spreadsheet and copy the data across. At the end of each month, the new data is printed and displayed for all to see, allowing each person to see how he or she compares to the others in the box. This is a system we still use and highly recommend to any affiliate owner.

Our growth in the nine months since we opened our big box has been cyclic. We may sit on a plateau for a few weeks, and just when you think something has gone wrong there seems to be an unexpected wave of new inquiries. At first this cycle can be hard on the emotions, but we have learned to expect and live with it. Interestingly, almost all the other affiliate owners I have spoken to share a similar pattern.

We are currently approaching 60 members and average about 35 people through the door each day, running morning and evening sessions only. People often ask me, "How many members do you want?" For me, I have never set an upper limit, and I don't intend to. In my opinion, numbers through the door are a reflection of a job well done, and if it means that we have to hire more trainers and go to a bigger box, then I am more than all right with that.

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Learn and Believe

A big part of what prompted me to write this personal account was inspired by a talk with a friend who more recently opened a box. I asked him, "How are things going?" "Good," he replied—but I could hear some uncertainty in his voice. It wasn't until this point that I started to reflect on the emotions I had felt and suppressed not that long ago and realized it's in our nature to remain externally positive, even if we're not really feeling that way inside. Many times people had asked me the same question, and the response was always positive, but did I really believe it? Maybe this is just a self-defense mechanism, but if we can't pass on our personal experiences to others in the same situation, then they have no way of knowing whether the feelings they are experiencing are unique or common.

If I had to review the progress of Coastal CrossFit QLD at this point in time, I would say I am proud of what we have achieved and am quietly confident of bigger things to come. In hindsight, I wouldn't change a thing. Mistakes are a necessary part of the journey and allow us to prove to ourselves what works and what doesn't work in a given situation. Take risks that you can afford and learn from them, good or bad. If affiliation is a goal of yours, then gather as much information as you can from other affiliate owners and the broader CrossFit community. Get to know your local affiliate, attend competitions, read the *CrossFit Journal* and affiliate page, and back yourself 100 percent. If you truly have the passion and have created the right foundations for success, you will succeed.

CrossFit is rapidly gaining momentum in Australia at the moment, and I am thankful that I had the support and belief in myself to follow this dream.

For anyone who would like more detailed information on our affiliation journey, please don't hesitate to contact me at info@coastalcrossfit.com.au.



About the Author

Chris Saliba is the co-owner and head trainer of Coastal CrossFit Queensland along with his wife Marie. They have two children, Chloe and Jesse. Chris is a Level 1 CrossFit coach, has completed the CrossFit Olympic Weightlifting Cert and is an Australian Weightlifting Federation club-level weightlifting coach. Outside of CrossFit, Chris is an avid motocross rider and also competed in the 2010 CrossFit Games Australia Regional.