

## The Secrets of Sticking With It

It started with a scientific experiment about “fitness adherence.”  
It ended as another CrossFit success story.

Chris Cooper



This is the story of how you get your clients off their butts.

Or, if you insist on more polite conversation, we can talk about a fitness adherence study I conducted to try to understand what makes people stay with an exercise program. Among the key factors identified were intensity, novelty, accountability and competition. Sound familiar?

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Let's back up. By 2006, I had already been in the fitness industry for a decade. It had been decade of constant study, research review, professional discussion and pain-taking exercise prescription. I had coached, trained, sold fitness equipment and competed as a powerlifter. Thanks to a Canadian Forces research project, I had been able to take a chance on opening my own facility.

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### The problem:

**80 percent of my clients weren't doing their homework. I don't mean they weren't bringing any intensity to their workouts or skipping parts. I mean they weren't doing any of it.**

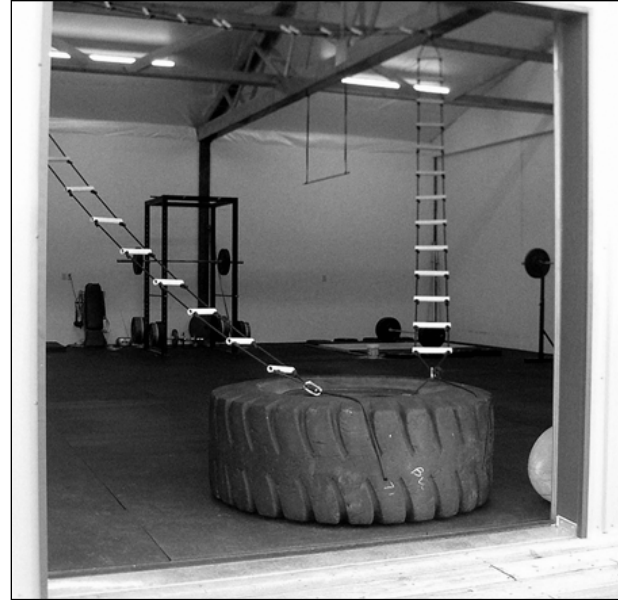
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By that point I was writing the best programs of my life. Or so I thought. I could talk about linear periodization and rate of force development and insulin sensitivity for hours. And I did. I was tough and creative. I gave clients crisp, point-by-point workout prescriptions other trainers wouldn't. I stayed up all night building food plans and tapering programs.

But there was a big problem: 80 percent of my clients weren't doing their homework. I don't mean they weren't bringing any intensity to their workouts or skipping parts. I mean they weren't doing any of it. The obvious exceptions were the hardcore athletes, who had something to lose if they didn't train. But how could anyone expect to make progress if he or she only spent an hour per week exercising?

### **Ditching Workouts: Finding the Why Behind the Whining**

We were a small personal-training facility called Catalyst. We didn't sell memberships. Our clients were to do their workouts at home or at other local gyms. We wrote programs that were easy to follow and could be done anywhere. But our clients still they weren't doing their workouts. My clients could generate plenty of intensity



***The empty box:  
a product of laziness, fear, apathy and a lack of motivation.***

when I was with them. They were excellent at keeping appointments with me. So why couldn't they work out on their own? With our reputation on the line, we decided we'd better figure out why. After all, no workout is more important than the next workout.

Step 1—try to determine average adherence rates for gym members and people working with personal trainers. We had to make sure it wasn't just us. That took three months.

Most of the data available was from physiotherapy, and the statistics weren't good. We expected a high adherence rate from people who used exercise to alleviate pain and get back to work. That wasn't the case. After two weeks of being left on their own, physiotherapy patients were less than 70 percent likely to do the prescribed exercises—even if they were only stretches. After 30 days, fewer than half were actually doing exercises that would help.

Trying to find more data was tougher. Gyms aren't keen to divulge membership numbers. Most don't track attendance rates. Or maybe they know the numbers but don't want to report them. We turned instead to government-sponsored exercise programs and non-profit organizations.

Government programs in Canada operate on a grants-based system. Unfortunately, with three levels of government and dozens of bureaucratic agencies funding these projects, there's a lot of overlap and very little objective measurement. Take a look at the mission statement of any government-funded or non-profit program and you'll see something like this: "To increase participation in our community and encourage active living." Talk about non-specific, immeasurable goals! As a private business owner, these programs make me cringe.

It was time for us to do something.

### **Volunteers Needed: Must Be Able to Quit Working Out**

I put an article on a local news site asking for 12 volunteers who weren't currently Catalyst members. They were told we were studying the efficacy of a workout program, not the adherence rate. The volunteers were split into two groups.

Group 1 got a booklet with exercise descriptions and pictures. The booklet detailed a month's worth of workouts, written day by day. Group members were told to check off the workouts they started, even if they didn't complete them. Group 2 was given the same booklet without the workouts included. Instead, they were e-mailed the daily workout and asked to reply with times or weights they had used.

The groups came in and met with us. We ran through the dozen exercises with them, answered their questions and gave them instructions. They were told to do as many of the workouts as possible.

After a month, we asked for their tracking logs. Group 1 had completed about 30 percent of their workouts, which was average for us. Group 2 had completed over 50 percent of their e-mailed workouts, and they were posting their scores. At this point, we didn't reply to their postings. We just logged their scores when they did their workouts. At the end of the month, three out of the six requested to keep getting the e-mailed workouts!

Group 2's adherence rate of 50 per cent doesn't seem that great, but it's much better than the industry average. Our original plan was to end the study there and just start e-mailing people their workouts daily, but one of my partners thought the results were interesting enough to keep going.



Courtesy of Catalyst Fitness

***Tyler Belanger (jumping) was the first guinea pig in the CrossFit experiment at Catalyst Fitness.***

We applied for government funding through one body and were redirected to another. In the end we were given a 50 percent reimbursement allowance. That meant for every dollar we spent on the research, we'd be given 50 cents back, provided we developed a product for sale and created jobs. That started a two-year research and development process. More importantly, it changed the way we approach fitness.

### **Get With the Program: Keeping the Slackers in the Gym**

Using a rickety platform we built called MorningCatalyst.com, we videotaped a few dozen exercises and started signing up trainees. We manipulated variables monthly in an attempt to increase adherence. Some of the results were startling.

First, we started reporting people's adherence rates on a weekly basis. We'd send an e-mail on Sunday saying, "Bill, your weekly adherence rate is 60 percent. Good job." At first, we used the same comments for everyone automatically. Later, we'd change the feedback to a personal note from a Catalyst trainer. Letting practitioners know their adherence rate bumped their success up a bit, but the personal note had far more impact.

**Lesson learned:**

***People relate to a personality better than to a program.***

Next, we started providing a weekly and monthly ranking—anonously, of course. The weekly Sunday e-mail would say something like, "Bill, your weekly adherence rate is 60 percent. That's better than last week! Sixty percent puts you in fifth place among men!" Adherence improved again.

**Lesson learned:**

***People compare themselves to other people, whether they admit it or not.***

Next step: increase the intensity of the workouts. We used the same workouts we'd used the first month and added weight or repetitions or inserted goal times to increase

the challenge. This produced mixed results. But we had hypothesized that adherence would decrease, so we were surprised again.

**Lesson learned:**

***People want to be challenged. But how best to do it? We learned the answer later.***

The variable that produced the biggest result was novelty. We'd always taken great pride in never giving a client the same workout prescription twice. When we applied this tenet to our study, we found that not knowing what would come next improved adherence nearly 15 percent alone. We also mixed rest days so participants couldn't count on days off beyond knowing that they'd rest two days per week.

**Lesson learned:**

***People like variety and surprise.***

Next, we thought, "What if people have to pay for it? Will they be more likely to complete the workouts?" We added a \$30 monthly fee to continue with the program. Our subscriptions fell when we ended the free service. But those who stayed were more likely to do the prescribed workout, even if they dropped out at the end of the month.



Courtesy of Catalyst Fitness

***Chris Cooper found the transition from powerlifting to Linda to be a struggle—but he made it.***



*The author discovered people want a challenging workout. CrossFit just might be able to help them find it.*

**Lesson learned:**

***People try to get their money's worth.***

Even if they hate the workouts, people will do them if they perceive they'll waste money by not doing them. They may not come back the next month, though. The stick works, but the carrot is better.

At this point, we were nearly a year in. We'd already learned things that seemed intuitive but ran counter to the instruction we'd received in university. Celebrate success? Hold people accountable? Be challenging and quick? In hindsight, it seems obvious: why is everyone else still doing three sets of eight on the ambiguous bi machine?

At the time, though, we were challenging the very foundations of our educations in the field. Think about this: after spending tens of thousands to learn what works, you're invested in the idea that your teachers were right. You know the list. Calorie-reduced diets plus cardio equals fat loss. Women don't want to lift weights. Thirty minutes of walking per day will get you somewhere.

Did we really want to be wrong? Hell, no. We fought it every step of the way.

A year in, we revisited the idea of bringing a group together to do the workouts at our gym. We wanted to test the effect that group interaction and achievement would bring. We called it our Morning Catalyst Live Group. We met every night at 7 p.m. for a month.

The adherence rate was well over 80 percent for our eight enrollees. Score one for group interaction. There was a charge for participation. In hindsight, this may have limited enrolment and boosted attendance by people looking to get the most for their money. But the group setting allowed us to better coach more complex lifts.

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**Lesson learned:**

***People enjoy group settings.***

Finally, after learning the lesson that complex tasks will help keep people coming back for more, we started to incorporate Olympic lifts and powerlifting movements. Unfortunately, adherence dropped. In subsequent feedback forums people admitted they were unlikely to do a movement they weren't comfortable performing. One participant booked private training to learn the lifts, and her adherence rate rebounded.

**Lesson learned:**

***People are motivated by live coaching.***

**If It Looks Like CrossFit and Smells Like CrossFit...**

By this point, the link between our research and CrossFit's methodology and philosophies was becoming very obvious. Let's make this clear: we didn't set out to prove CrossFit works. Heck, we were originally sceptical of CrossFit. But we couldn't ignore the way our research was

dovetailing with the CrossFit program. Every time we thought we'd found a weak spot, our own daily workout feedback pushed us toward CrossFit.

The time had come for me to stop thinking about lions and throw myself into the den. I was still fairly competitive in powerlifting. I worried about losing weight, so I offered the project up to our team.

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In early 2008, more than two years after starting research into exercise adherence, one of my trainers, Tyler Belanger, volunteered to do CrossFit for a month. His first day was a 10 km run. Tyler is a football player. He gutted it out. Day 2 was more to his strengths. He completed Isabel's 30 snatches of 135 pounds in six minutes.

Tyler published a blog. Another trainer volunteered to go next. Tyler opted to continue. Clients reading the blog asked if they could be thrown into the mix. I opened up our one-on-one PT facility for an hour every day for "open CrossFit time." We didn't charge or coach. We just let people use the space. They had to come at 6 a.m., but they still came. In ten days, we had a waiting list for the next month. We were excited, to say the least.

I started in May. I was pretty intimidated. Both of our trainers were setting the bar very high.

My first workout was a dream come true: CrossFit Total. Coming out of a four-year stint in competitive powerlifting, I thought I'd dominate. I had good lifts, but unbelted my numbers suffered and I barely made 1,000 pounds. Linda, a.k.a. Three Bars of Death, was in there that first week. A ten-to-one triplet of deadlift (1.5 times bodyweight),

bench press (body weight) and clean (three-quarters body weight), Linda had me collapsed on the floor after reaching eight deadlift reps. I wasn't sure I'd continue.

Luckily, May 2008 featured a lot of strength work, and my deadlift actually made a small increase. I was getting hooked. Our clients were asking for more group workouts. We started the affiliation process soon after and opened a second facility to accommodate our new CrossFit habit.

The latest update? We continue to grow, based largely on referrals. We now practice the "tricks of the trade" we learned from our research on encouraging adherence. It's working.



### **About The Author**

*Chris Cooper is president of Catalyst Fitness in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, in Canada. Split between two facilities—a private personal training centre and a CrossFit box—Catalyst Fitness is engaged in research, athletic development and the pursuit of all things fitness. Chris has two small kids, a 14-hour workday, a 2:51 Diane and a 520-pound deadlift PR. He also has an incredible staff of trainers, therapists and coaches, as well as a probable case of mild ADD and a very patient wife.*

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