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Attention to Retention

Affiliate owners share their strategies for keeping members happy and coming back for more.

By Emily Beers

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Courtesy of Dale Ryan Thompson

In [The Five Love Languages](#), Gary Chapman suggests people express and experience love in different ways, meaning individuals give, receive and perceive love differently. And according to Chapman, one of the keys for a healthy relationship is for individuals to get to know how their partner experiences love.



Courtesy of Josh Newman

Fitness is always the focus, but many affiliate owners have found activities outside the gym help keep clients engaged and happy.

“People will quit a workout program, but they won’t quit on a relationship”—that’s something CrossFit Founder and CEO Greg Glassman has said, and it’s clear that having strong relationships with clients is important, not just for their health but also for the health of a business.

Chapman’s five languages are quality time, receiving gifts, acts of service, words of affirmation and physical touch, and it turns out CrossFit affiliate owners are instinctively—perhaps even subconsciously—speaking these languages to show their clients how much they care about them. The ultimate goal, of course, is to connect with clients to keep them healthy and happy and to retain their business for life.

Quality Time: More Than a Workout

Cindy Allinson, owner of CrossFit Crux in Stouffville, Ontario, never intended to open a gym or be a business owner of any kind. Five years ago, she was a humble mother who just wanted to make sure she stayed fit, and some of her friends were on the same page.

“We were a bunch of moms, and we would work out in the park together as a mom-and-tots group. We thought we should be getting exercise, so we went to the park and did CrossFit in the basketball courts,” Allinson said.

Eventually this led Allinson to open CrossFit Crux with her husband, Sean Allinson, four years ago.

“For a long time, it was more a hobby than a business. But eventually you want to see what it can become,” she said about how she started to take herself more seriously as a business owner.

Because she wanted her business to survive—and flourish—Allinson quickly learned the importance of client retention, especially in a relatively small city of 24,000.

“Stouffville isn’t like a big city where people are always moving there,” Allinson said. When new athletes do make it through the doors of CrossFit Crux, it’s crucial to keep them there.

First and foremost, Allinson strives to develop genuine friendships with her clients and spend quality time with them. When you're spending time with your friends, it doesn't feel like work, Allinson explained. She believes that when you know what's going on in your clients' lives—when you know the names of spouses and children—client retention takes care of itself. This is relatively easy to do in a small town, in which everyone is connected to everyone else in one way or other.

Allinson reported that 85 percent of her members have been with her since CrossFit Crux's first few months four years ago.

As most coaches do, the Allinsons host community events, and they also invite their clients to their cottage to get to know each other outside the gym environment. Their efforts seem to be working.

"Eight of those 10 women are still with me," Allinson said of her original mom-and-tots group.

Allinson admits, though, it's getting tougher to keep on top of one-on-one friendships now that membership at CrossFit Crux has grown to greater than 120. So to build community this year, CrossFit Crux turned the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games Open into a competition and social event. Each person from CrossFit Crux who signed up for the Open—85 out of 120 members—was put onto an in-house team.

"We tried to make the teams pretty even," said Allinson, who separated her athletes into four categories—competitive, Rx, scaled and brand new—before she made teams. Teams then came up with names, and each team was given a chance to host one of the five Open events.

"Each Friday night was a different theme. One team was called Victoria's Secret, and all the guys on that team wore (feather) boas," Allinson laughed. "It was the best event we've ever run. We had food and drinks and it really did bring a new energy to the gym. Everyone is already looking forward to it next year."



Courtesy of Cindy Allinson

Cindy Allinson uses team workouts and theme workouts to add variety at CrossFit Crux.

She continued: "That kind of stuff has really helped retention. It gets people to rally behind it and talk about it on Facebook, too. Then others see it and go, 'Hey, I didn't know I could go to a gym where you work out and drink afterward.' I mean, not that (drinking after a workout) is what's it's all about. But at the same time, it kind of is what it's all about."

What Allinson means is that one of her goals is to provide her clients with more than just a workout, and sometimes this means letting loose with a beer or two.

Allinson reported that 85 percent of her members have been with her since CrossFit Crux's first few months four years ago, and almost every person who has left has done so due to moving.

With success behind her, Allinson knows she can't become complacent and just assume her friends will keep coming and hitting workouts three days a week until they're 80 years old. Members of her original moms group are soon to be middle-aged women, and it's important to her to keep them motivated well into their 50s.

Fitness will look different for these mothers at 50 and 60 than it did at 40, so Allinson's plan is to keep her clients educated and up to date with what's going on in their bodies.

"Ten years down the road, most of my members will be in their 50s. So I need to spend time on educating them on safety and movements. We need to educate them that it's more than just a workout. It's a lifestyle, and it doesn't have to end when you're 50," she said.

Small Gifts, Big Rewards

Even if you're not the kind of person who needs to celebrate every single birthday or anniversary with an elaborate date and expensive gift, most people enjoy receiving a small gift from time to time, a token of appreciation that says, "Saw this, thought of you."

This is the idea behind Darren Ellis' postcard program.

Ellis is the owner of CrossFit New Zealand in Auckland. He's been around since 2008 and has learned that doing simple, thoughtful things for clients goes a long way in keeping them motivated and happy, as well as feeling loved and appreciated.

Happy clients will stick around and are also more likely to bring in a referral or two, explained Ellis. So when Ellis stumbled across a company in New Zealand that sends

out postcards through the country's postal service, he saw it as an opportunity to give a small gift to show his appreciation to his clients.

"You pick a template and insert an image, and you can write a personalized message," Ellis said. So whenever he takes a good photo of a client, he creates a personalized postcard, which is automatically snail-mailed to his client with a message.

"Hey, you've been smashing it in class. I'm really excited to see your progress," Ellis said of the kinds of things he writes to clients.

"I can do a whole bunch (of postcards) at once. Usually what happens is I'll be inspired by one really good photo we took of a client, and so I'll find a few more and send out a few at once," he said.

Postcards cost him NZD\$3 each, much cheaper than taking every single client he has out for breakfast or a drink to thank them for their ongoing business.



Courtesy of Lesa Komor

As a special gift to a client, Darren Ellis sent Lesa Komor a postcard with this image from the 2014 Open.

"It has proven to work well—receiving something unexpected. It's reinforcement that isn't expected," Ellis explained. "It can go a long way."

Lesa Komor received one of Ellis' postcards. He sent it to recognize her as "The Spirit of the Open." In the picture, Komor is standing near her bar getting ready to begin an Open event.

"I was so nervous about doing the Open," said Komor. She added that she never would have put herself out there without the support of her community.

Receiving the postcard brightened her day.

"I was totally surprised. I thought it was great to receive something through snail mail, as most people tend not to use that method if they don't have to," Komor said. "I was so stoked that someone recognized me in such a positive way, especially when I didn't think I did anything great."

Her postcard ended up proudly displayed on a shelf at home, where it still sits today. Komor explained that the simple postcard brightens her day but also inspires her to keep going.

"Not just with CrossFit, but with life in general," she said.

"It's easy to recognize all of the big names in CrossFit, or the names of those who are always on the leaderboard at your own box. Sometimes we forget about those who are giving it their all in the background," she said. The recognition showed her someone noticed she was working her butt off.

"People will go the extra mile or do what it takes to be in an environment where they feel appreciated and supported," she said.

Services With a Smile

In terms of the love languages, some people place high value on the services their partner provides for them. Whether it's cooking a warm dinner or fixing a computer, some show their appreciation through labors of love.

Affiliate owner Dale Ryan Thompson believes offering a broad array of services is also a good way to keep his clients happy.

Thompson is one of the owners of 12 Labours, a brand associated with three different affiliate locations: CrossFit Syndicate, CrossFit Annapolis and CrossFit BWI, all of which are in Maryland. Thompson's team—CrossFit Syndicate—placed ninth at the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games.



Tai Randall

Members at CrossFit Syndicate got to cheer their team to a ninth-place finish at the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games.



Ronald Hartman

Dale Ryan Thompson (right) believes providing a broad range of services is critical to retaining members.

Thompson's main focus is on providing great service for his clients. Ten years ago, affiliate clientele was much different. Most people discovered CrossFit by accident and had no prior knowledge of functional fitness, so they were less critical of the service they received.

Today, though, most people who show up at a CrossFit box have some knowledge and experience with training functional movements at high intensity and thus have an expectation of receiving great coaching and helpful services. Thompson is aware of this, and providing a broad range of quality services is his No. 1 priority.

"Retention comes down to a value piece. You have to keep giving continuous value to your clients. We offer two different programming tracks (for different levels of athletes). We have a competitor's blog, Olympic-weightlifting classes, strength classes," he explained. On top of this, members of any of the affiliates can attend specialized classes at all three locations.

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— Dale Ryan Thompson

"At our Olympic-lifting class today, we had five athletes from each gym, so we had people traveling to use the Olympic-lifting program from a different location that is 20 minutes away because we were offering something there that we don't offer at their home gym right now," he said.

"We want members to have a journey of fitness where there's no end point. If they want to branch out and do

more strength work for a while, they have options. A lot of times retention is lost because people want to try something different. So we try to give them options so they can continue on wherever they want to go," he added.

From endurance classes to a CrossFit competitors program, Thompson works to cater to as many varied interests as possible and ensure nobody gets bored.

"We want to provide people with things to make their lives easier so they can reach their goals," he said.

Facebook Affirmation

People give and receive love through words of affirmation, and Thompson uses Facebook to show a little bit of public love.

First and foremost, Facebook is used to disseminate important information to clients, explained Thompson, but it's also a good opportunity to celebrate your clients' victories via pictures and videos.

One of Thompson's coaches—Rebecca Koch, who competed on CrossFit Syndicate's team at the Affiliate Cup—is essentially the social-media director for his entire

affiliate. She's also in charge of planning social events throughout the year for all three affiliates, with the overall goal of adding value for their clients. Of course, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram help Koch get the word out to clients.

One of the keys to having a successful Facebook presence is to post often. Koch constantly updates the Facebook page, explaining that she cycles through different styles of posts ranging from marketing and sales-related subject matter to posts that are more member focused.

To put the spotlight on the athletes, Koch posts pictures and videos, often sent out through Instagram, to showcase things such as personal bests as well as "member spotlights."

"Spotlights are a more detailed look at an athlete who has done an exceptional job or has reached a milestone," Koch said. "Recently, the entire 12 Labours community rallied around our Games team and really wanted to hear about it. Features on those athletes have been the most popular."

To make for more efficient posting, Koch uses Eye-Fi, an SD card with wireless capabilities that allows users to automatically upload digital photos to both smartphones and tablets, as well to social media sites such as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram.

Koch's position is all about driving community and client retention.

"It totally aids retention. The social aspect of CrossFit in and out of the box is extremely important to people," she said. "It's a low-cost way to create a large number of advocates for our brand and for our style of training and business."

The Physical Workouts

Some people value the physical side of a relationship as much as or even more than the mental and emotional side.

The same is true of clients. Some clients do not need gifts or social media to feel appreciated. Some people place higher value on the physical side of CrossFit: the workouts and their performance. Simply put, if they like the programming and they're improving, they'll stick around.

Josh Newman is owner of CrossFit NYC The Black Box in New York, New York, an affiliate that will celebrate its 10-year anniversary this summer. When The Black Box opened 10 years ago, it was the 15th affiliate in the world. Newman can still remember having just 20 members, and he needed 30 to cover the rent.



Ruby Wolff

Rebecca Koch (middle) uses social media to create community at her affiliate, while Christa Giordano (right) said exit interviews with departing members can help a gym improve its service.



Courtesy of Josh Newman

At CrossFit NYC The Black Box, staff deliver quality coaching and well-run classes to retain their 2,200 members.

“And I wasn’t sure there would be 30 people in New York City who wanted to do this CrossFit thing,” he said. Today, he has 2,200 members in a 40,000-square-foot facility.

In the early days, Glassman used to do a conference call each week with all the affiliate owners, Newman recalled.

“We would talk about things like where to buy bumper plates.”

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—Josh Newman

And, of course, they talked about retention. Back then, the biggest retention tool was simply being a good coach who provided good performance results for your athletes. When it comes right down to it, that’s still true 10 years later.

“The degree to which you’re delivering a good CrossFit product—be it good coaching, well-run classes, a well-run facility—that keeps people in the gym. That, and the programming,” said Newman, who believes these elements are the backbone of retention.

He elaborated: “It’s a bit of a three-legged stool: results, community and fun. Those are the three things we’re giving to people for their money, and we’re balancing those three things.”

To keep his clients happy, he places a high emphasis on programming.

Newman said the programming “can’t be boring,” which means constantly changing and reassessing the way he does things to keep up with the changing times.

“Each time we see growth slowing down, we sit down and talk about what we need to do, how we can take advantage of our size,” he said.

Much of it has come down to giving the right workouts to the right people. Because he has 40,000 square feet of space and 24 full-time coaches, Newman can offer 400 classes each week. Often, seven different classes are going on at once.

"We have elements classes with beginner WODs for people with less than six months experience. We have experienced WODs. We have competition programming," he said.

Despite his success, Newman admits his instincts have sometimes been wrong and he has made some mistakes.

Prior to this year, he tried to get as many athletes as he could to simply participate in the CrossFit Games Open, thinking that if he made it too competitive, people would get scared and wouldn't sign up.

"We set out to create a friendly competition, trying to have the biggest Open team that we could. The goal was just to get people signed up, just to get their names on the roster. The important thing was participation," he said.

It worked out, but this year Newman went against his instincts and challenged his athletes to really step up and perform during the Open.

"We took the opposite approach. I didn't care if a smaller number of people signed up. We told people we only want them to sign up if they're going to take it seriously," he said. "And we got our members to really benchmark themselves to see where they're at."

With this new approach, 600 of his members committed and competed in the Open, put their fears aside and admitted they cared about their performance. And what he found was people really appreciated this.

"This approach got us 25 percent more people than just promoting participation," he said.

The point is that one of the major goals of CrossFit has always been increased work capacity—increased fitness. Performance gains will always keep people around, and Newman was reminded of that during the 2014 Open even if he'd already learned about it 10 years ago.



Courtesy of Josh Newman

The Black Box offers up to seven different classes at the same time, giving members a host of options.



Courtesy of Josh Newman

If this athlete doesn't show up to the gym for a while, software can help coaches notice and reconnect with her.

The Software Language

Whether running a big or small gym, most affiliate owners agree that having a computerized client-management system helps them keep track of their clients.

From Zen Planner to Mindbody to Front Desk and a host of others, software helps staff manage the gym with features that track attendance and streamline communication with clients.

When Allinson first opened CrossFit Crux, she kept track of everything—attendance, retention, billing—manually.

"I used to know everyone in my gym, when they showed up, who their kids were, when they were on vacation. Up until 50 members, I could do it all manually. But now that the business has grown and the demographics are changing and I'm not as in touch with everyone, we use Zen Planner," Allinson said. She explained that Zen Planner helps her run reports to find out who hasn't been in the gym in two weeks.

For the most part, Allinson still has a good grasp of all her clients, but the bigger her gym grows, the more she'll rely on technology to help her.

And when you're the owner of a gym with 2,200 members, you definitely need an automated system to make your life easier. Like Allinson, Newman uses software to book, track and bill members, ultimately providing him with data to help make his affiliate better.

Newman explained: "If retention starts to fall, not only are we able track retention in general, but we can track it by cohort. If it's falling for everything then maybe the bathroom needs to be fixed."

He continued: "But if it's the new people who are leaving, then maybe we need to send them an email after 45 days of being a member ... to help them make an easier transition from elements or on-ramp into group classes. And if it's longer-standing members whose retention is falling, then maybe we need to add more competitions."

The purpose for tracking these numbers is simple: “We use the data from the software to figure out where the problem might be.”

While many gym owners employ similar software, only some have taken the time to learn how to use all the features that can help a gym retain members. By using these features, staff can quickly identify those who need motivation as well as those who might deserve a big thank you for long-term membership.

The Exit Interview

No matter how hard you try, how many systems you have in place, and how great a product you’re delivering, sometimes people leave.

Often the reason they initially give isn’t the actual reason. For instance, they might say they can’t afford it right now, but the truth is they’re going through a divorce or another personal crisis and they’re simply having a hard time coping with life. This is why many coaches believe it’s important to sit down and have an exit interview with each client.

Sometimes the honesty actually changes a client’s mind, and other times it allows the affiliate owner to amicably part with a client and perhaps gain valuable insight into how the facility could be improved.

Christa Giordano is one of Thompson’s coaches. She explained that they require everyone who wants to leave to have a face-to-face conversation and fill out an exit survey.

“The majority of our clients leave due to being in the military and moving,” she said. But obviously there have been times when members leave for other reasons.

“It’s extremely important to know why we lose clients in case it is a problem we can fix,” Giordano added.

Thompson agreed: “We take their feedback and we make it better,” he said.

What they’ve found is a face-to-face exit interview allows the client and trainer to part on good terms. Giordano explained that this has often resulted in their members returning at a later date simply because the door was left wide open.

While Allinson, Ellis, Thompson and Newman have found retention strategies that work for them, it’s important for affiliate owners to constantly remain wide open to new ideas.

Maybe it’s offering a broad array of services or maybe it’s a focus on high-performance programming that makes your clients happy. Or maybe small things such as gifts and Facebook affirmations will help keep clients around. Or maybe it’s a coach-development program and facility and equipment upgrades that speak to the clients at the box.

The point is each affiliate owner has the opportunity to experiment and to listen to his or her clients to determine exactly what will make them want to come back every day to see what’s on the whiteboard.



About the Author

Emily Beers is a CrossFit Journal contributor and a coach at CrossFit Vancouver. She finished 37th at the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games.