

Preparing for the Olympic Boom - Part 2

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THE INTERNAL IMAGE - PEOPLE, FACILITY, AND DOCUMENTATION

The internal image is created by your facility, your people (both on the floor and in the office), and your in-house literature and documentation. Hopefully, after reading and hearing about your business, clients are impressed with what they experience when they call and/or arrive for the first time. This first impression is critical. **You only get one chance at a first impression** so it's very important to make it a good one.

CUSTOMER SERVICE - YOUR PEOPLE

The objective of everything you have done so far has been to get the phone to ring. First contact is, almost always, handled over the phone. Having trained and knowledgeable Customer Service Representatives (CSR) will determine what kind of impression the caller will have of your business and, even more importantly, whether or not they will come in to experience your program.

Phone Skills - Your telephone is literally the business's lifeline. The goal of every prospect inquiry call must be to achieve making an appointment to come visit the facility. Whatever else is said or done, if the call ends without an appointment, the call can be considered a failure. It is the Customer Service Representative's (CSR'S) job (and whoever answers the phone when it rings puts on the "CSR'S" hat) to sell the caller on the idea of visiting the gym. The most effective way to do this is to have a phone script that guides the "CSR" through a call, allows the "CSR" to take control of the conversation (sell instead of answer questions) and promotes the benefits of the program specific to the caller.

Big money has been invested in telemarketing technology in America to determine exactly what works in selling over the phone. There are many seminars one can attend to learn what will be most effective for your business. It was one of these seminars, hosted by AT&T, where I got information important in developing the Fun & Fit phone script. Three key points to answering the phone at Fun & Fit include:

A. Taking control of the conversation so that you can ask the questions necessary to give pertinent information, and sell the program(s) specific to the caller. Most callers have two things in mind - "How Much" and "When". The answers to these questions should be of secondary importance to a parent looking for a quality operation that will place their child in a class that is best educationally for that child. But, if the parent is ignorant to the fact that there are many different ways to teach gymnastics, they will not know to ask about class size, instructor education, certifications and qualifications, available equipment, or curriculum planning. If you put time and energy into running a quality gymnastics business that may be more expensive than a local recreation program, it is important that you communicate AND SELL it.

B. Sell Benefits instead of Features. It's the benefit which fulfills the "what's in it for me" thinking of the customer. As discussed earlier under advertising, telling a parent that "the maximum student/teacher ratio in a class is 8 to 1" may not mean anything of value. However, if you tell them "classes are small so your child will receive lots of personal attention from our instructor and many turns on the apparatus" this may be perceived as of value. The first example is that of explaining a feature while the second was the benefit.

C. Ask the caller to take action. At Fun & Fit, the call is not successful unless the "CSR" secures an appointment to visit the center. Everything we do and say must lead to this appointment. When asking for action make sure your question is structured so that a "no" answer is not an option. For example, "Would you prefer to come in for an evaluation during the week or on Saturday?", instead of "Would you like to make an appointment for an evaluation?".

A phone log is an important tool the office manager can use to monitor the effectiveness of the "CSR" and/or the script as well as any current advertising programs. **The difference between the number of calls received, and the number of appointments set up, is a direct measurement of the effectiveness of the "CSR" and the phone script.**

Empowering Office Staff To "Make It Right". Mistakes happen. How you deal with them will reflect on the image clients have of your business. It's important that your office people are authorized to make exceptions to your business's procedures. When I say exceptions I mean just that. I'm not suggesting that you fail to enforce procedures. That would be a tragic mistake. I'm saying that making an exception, and informing the client that this is what you are doing for them (and logging this exception in a permanent record) will go a long way in helping to build rapport and a bonding relationship with the client. You should use this exception as an opportunity to learn where you may have failed in the past in communicating your procedures. And by keeping records of the exceptions that you have made, you are able to avoid being taken advantage of by repeat offenders.

Client Friendly Procedures - If you want your clients to perceive your business in a positive way it's important that you take a look at your procedures to see what you can do to make them better.

A. Enrollment Procedures - Instead of mailing a "schedule of classes" that causes parents to select what they perceive as the best and most convenient lessons for their child, make an appointment to personally evaluate each child to insure placement in the very best class. Not only will this raise the level of professionalism of the gym, but it will also help to insure that the child receives a positive experience. In addition, you may be losing potential clients by mailing them a schedule. If they don't see any times and days that fit their needs they may never call back, or worse yet, may call your competitor.

B. Payment Procedures - By offering parents a "discount" and "priority enrollment" as an incentive for paying in advance, you create an opportunity for yourself to schedule classes that are full before a session, or month, even begins. As opposed to charging a "late fee" and trying to collect after the fact, your clients will perceive this as a reward instead of a penalty, enhancing positive feelings about your business.

C. Make-up Lessons - If parents are made to understand that a place in class is like a seat at a concert, and that whether they show up or not the show goes on as scheduled, they will understand the importance of calling in advance if they wish a make-up credit. Why is calling in advance important? Because it allows you to provide this space to another student. And that way, make-up lessons cost you nothing except the time spent in the office to schedule them.

FACILITY

We already know the importance of maintaining a clean, bright, colorful and safe looking facility. We must also make sure that the facility conforms to whatever expectations we have created in our advertising and publicity. If your business is represented as an Olympic training center, and when people come in what they see is pre-school movement equipment and teddy bears on the walls, you can bet there will be some disappointment of un-met expectations. And, on the other hand, if you

claim to specialize in recreational gymnastics (which is where the lion's share of the business is) but your facility is filled with regulation equipment and instructors that are "coaching" as opposed to "teaching", their expectations may also be un-fulfilled.

DOCUMENTATION

Everything you hand out reflects on the professionalism of your business. It is the small details that make a difference. In our industry, brochures, flyers, curriculum materials and enrollment documents are an important part of communication. They should be proof read and spell checked (it's amazing how many gym's materials have typographical errors and misspelled words) prior to being professionally printed. And the quality of paper is also important. See to it that your literature makes you look great!

SUMMARY

As our industry matures our advertising, public relations, facilities, people and literature must all function to create an image of quality. Our commitment, industry wide, to furthering the professional image of gymnastics, will bring with it justifiably higher tuitions and, as a result, increased profits and greater success.