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HOW TO RETAIN MEMBERS THROUGH GYM FLOOR INTERACTION

by Kris Tynan

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About the Author



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In the twenty years Kris has been involved in the fitness industry she has consistently focused on improving the pro-active gym floor contact between instructors and members. Close to a thousand fitness professionals have attended her 'Interactive Instructor' workshop and she has consulted to many of the leading UK health club chains in both the private and public sectors.

Kris has spoken at industry conferences and events including Bodylife, FitPro Business and Multitrax in the UK, IHRSA in the US, NetFit and Business Grow in NZ and FILEX. She is also a featured author with *Club Success* magazine in the US and *FitPro Business* in the UK.

Kris was a director of the UK's fitness trade body The Fitness Industry Association (FIA) for four years and a judge of the UK's FLAME awards. She is a member of REPs in NZ and is certified with ACSM. She works with private clients in the area of weight loss and active living and is a neuro linguistic programming practitioner.

In addition to gym floor interaction she also works in the area of best practice regarding the implementation of inductions that improve adherence and retention of new members.

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HOW TO RETAIN MEMBERS THROUGH GYM FLOOR INTERACTION

While many things have improved in our industry over the last few years, one area that remains disappointingly average in many clubs is the level of service on the gym floor.

In research undertaken by the Fitness Industry Association in the UK last year, less than a third of new members (three months into their membership) recalled being spoken to on every visit and almost 36% were spoken to rarely or never (see Table 1 below).

When these new members were followed up four months later (i.e. approximately eight months into their membership) it was calculated that the rate of quitting among those who were rarely or never spoken to was 50% higher than among members who were spoken to on every visit.

Table 1

How often do the fitness staff speak to you?

Every visit	30.9%
Occasionally	32.6%
Rarely	18.9%
Never	17.0%

From 'Revisiting the Retention Battle' by Dr M Hillsdon.
For further information on the full report contact the FIA – www.fia.org.uk

This outcome will be no surprise to those who have long suspected this to be the case, but it is useful to now have evidence that suggests contact between gym users and fitness staff is a key part of the exercise adherence puzzle.

Five key steps

Before you set about improving the situation in your club, five key steps need to be considered.

1. Change the culture

To achieve a culture change a very strong belief must exist that interaction on the gym floor is desirable and necessary. Sharing information like the above FIA research is imperative especially if you are employing Generation Y'ers (up to 26 year olds). This generation won't be 'told' what to do; they need to understand 'why'. They also

want a collaborative approach to any decisions made, so although it may seem time consuming, having the team come up with their own solutions (with a little guidance from management) may pay dividends in the long run. It is also worth noting here that managers need to earn the respect of Generation Y'ers, which means management walking the talk. It is hypocritical to ask your instructors to make better contact with members if you fail to speak to people when you pass through the facility.

2. Spot the members most in need of contact

Many of your instructors will insist that they do speak to members, but of course these are often the same old regulars that everyone knows or the people they like. Teach them to recognise the quieter, less consistent of your members or the 60%ers. Industry veteran Sandy Coffman coined the phrase to describe the 60% of members who are less confident in a gym environment, who don't ask for help and just come in and train without getting involved with the club. These are the members who make up attrition numbers. Table 2 below shows you how to spot a 60%er or a new member.

Table 2

How to spot a 60%er or new member

- They don't catch your eye
- They look at their program card
- They wear new shoes or clothes
- You don't recognise them or they look familiar but you don't know their name
- They look hesitant about using machines
- They follow a fairly conventional program
- They don't look honed or toned
- They wear t-shirt and leggings or cargos
- They don't ask questions of you

3. Set goals and targets

Reasonable contact targets should be as follows; an instructor on duty alone, free to work the floor (i.e. with no appointments) should make contact with 90% of all gym users at quiet times (where up to 20 people are working out at any time). During busier times (up to 50 people working out) a

target of 50% would not be unreasonable. These targets will differ from club to club and I suggest you have your gym team come up with what is reasonable for them. If you fail to take this measure it is unlikely improvements will occur.

4. Give them some tools to do the job

Generation Y'ers may be able to navigate the web or work a mobile phone keypad at the speed of light, but it does not follow that their verbal communication skills or experience in approaching different types of people is so highly developed. You need to train them and give them tools they can use. Three of the best of these are listed below.

5. Measure and reward behaviour

WIIFM (What's in it for me?) holds universal appeal regardless of the generation your employees come from. Rewards create incentive; it's as simple as that. And if you are not going to measure the goals and targets that you set for your staff, then it is not worth setting them in the first place.

Tools to use

These three tools offer some of the best ways of fostering communication between your team and your members.

WOW!AM or Work Out With A Member

This is one of the best pro-active methods we have of connecting with members.

Who to use it with: 60%ers (i.e. members you don't know).

Best time to use: Quiet times.

Guidelines: This is not for the benefit of the instructor, who should work at the same pace or use the same weight that the member does for about 2 to 5 minutes. The instructor should not induce a sweat if it can be helped!

Best exercises: Rower, stepper, X-trainer, treadmill walk, abdominal work, stretching, and dumbbell exercises (e.g. raises, curls, kickback).

Please note: If this is being done at quiet times the instructor may be the only staff member on duty and as such should remain as visible as possible.

When to approach the member: The instructor can either join in when the member starts an exercise, (this is most appropriate on the free weights and mat work) or at any time during cardio exercises. The instructor should tell the exerciser that they are going to work with them until the end of the time or distance they are planning to do, providing the member is not just starting a twenty minute run! Once an instructor is working out with a member, he or she can push them a bit further, coach them, compliment them or find out more about them through general conversation. Keep a WOW!AM log for each instructor to ensure this tool is used effectively (See Table 5 on pg 7).

RPE intensity checks

Even with the prevalence of heart rate monitoring equipment built into most cardio machines this tool is still very appropriate for instructors to use. The BORG RPE (Rating of Perceived Exhaustion) scale (a Google search of 'Borg scale' will give you several useful sites) is ideal for this purpose (see Table 3 below).

Who to use it with: All members but particularly 60%ers who probably don't understand heart rate training zones and would appreciate the information you can give them.

Best time to use: Anytime.

Guidelines: The instructor should display the scale to the member who is working out (having this on the back of a small notebook which can be kept in a pocket is ideal) and ask them to assess which number best describes how hard the effort feels.

Best exercises: Any cardio piece, but can also be used when weight training if asked during the last couple of reps of a set.

Once the number has been elicited from the member, the instructor can discuss what it means and if it fits with the goals they have. This tool is great in that it educates the member to take responsibility for how hard they need to be working and teaches them to trust themselves in terms of intensity.

Table 3

Borg scale

15 point scale

- 6 - 20% effort - Very, very light (at rest)
- 7 - 30% effort
- 8 - 40% effort
- 9 - 50% effort - Very light (gentle walking)
- 10 - 55% effort
- 11 - 60% effort - Fairly light
- 12 - 65% effort
- 13 - 70% effort - Moderately hard (steady pace)
- 14 - 75% effort
- 15 - 80% effort - Hard
- 16 - 85% effort
- 17 - 90% effort - Very hard
- 18 - 95% effort
- 19 - 100% effort - Very, very hard
- 20 - Exhaustion

Mini surveys

This is a win-win tool; the member feels like they have their say, you elicit valuable information and like all these tools it allows for good contact and rapport building between member and instructor.

Who to use it with: Everyone

Best time to use: Quieter times

When to approach the member: Ideally at a time in their workout when they are not working too hard so that they can actually converse – the cardio warmup is ideal. The staff member doing the survey should always begin by asking the member if they have already completed the survey for another instructor. If they have, seek an alternative.

Guidelines: Surveys should be short and sweet. Ask just five questions, starting with an easy opener. Examples might be:

- How long have you been a member?
- What type of membership do you have?
- How far do you travel to get to the club?

The next couple of questions might be:

- Which cardio machines do you most like using?
- Do you participate in any classes?
- When did you last have a program change or an assessment?
- Did you know every member can receive a free guest pass voucher for the month of December?

You can see where some of these questions could lead – booking a reassessment, explaining about the classes on offer, or giving a referral voucher.

More open questions can also be asked, like ‘What do you like most about the club?’ and the dreaded ‘What could we do to improve the club?’ A word of warning on this last one – if you have a serious non-changeable issue like no car parking, ensure the question is always prefaced with ‘Apart from the limited car parking, do you have any suggestions....’

In terms of measuring how your instructors are doing, a good question to ask when you are carrying out a survey yourself, is ‘How many of the instructors can you name?’ The more members who can name Bobby, the better the job he is probably doing.

The fifth and final question could be a fun one; ‘Name the Beatles’, ‘How many bones are in the human body?’, or ‘How many words can you come up with from the letters of SYDNEY?’; you can let your imagination run wild here.

Follow up: This is crucial. Managers must personally follow up any issues raised by members which have even a whiff of customer dissatisfaction. Any suggestions made should also be followed up even if it is just to say ‘thank you’ and to explain why they can’t be undertaken at the current time.

Results of the survey can be posted at the club (e.g. ‘89% of members travel less than ten minutes to get here’, or ‘Members vote the treadmill their favourite piece of equipment, followed by X-trainer, bike, and the rower last!’).

The final word on mini surveys: Over exposure of these will not work, so use them sparingly, maybe three a year for two weeks at a time. The only exception to this is when you have a new instructor and you set them a target of doing a certain number early on to help with their integration into the gym floor. In this case you could have a special ‘trainee survey’ you use for this purpose.

Measuring gym floor performance

Gym floor Kodak moment

This visual assessment of the instructor’s performance is conducted over approximately ten minutes. However the assessor would use his or her discretion if a situation demanded the instructor’s full attention and the time might be extended. The letters A to F remind the assessor of the areas being evaluated (e.g. so they can remember what to assess while working out themselves). The instructor being assessed would need to be free of appointments at this time and be in charge of working the floor.

By using the criteria in the guide below and Table 4 overleaf – which are weighted in terms of importance – an instructor can be given good feedback on the key elements of their performance on the gym floor. It is preferable that feedback be given to the instructor as soon after the actual assessment as possible, and it is especially important to reinforce and praise the well executed areas as well as making them aware of any low marks.

Guide to the evaluation criteria

A - Awareness and positioning

The instructor seems aware of what is happening in the gym (i.e. members entering or leaving). He or she reacts immediately to someone waiting or looking hesitant (i.e. looking for flags¹). While in contact with a member, his or her position allows them to see as much of the gym as possible, especially the entrance. If displaying perfect awareness and positioning score a full three points.

B – Body language, uniform, friendly facial expression

The instructor is marked down if he or she adopts unapproachable body language for more than a few minutes (i.e. crossed arms, hands hidden in sleeves, hands on hips, slouched, hands in pockets, chewing). Similarly for uniform, he or she should be wearing a badge, hair should be well groomed and the correct uniform code adhered to.

C – Contact with members (plural)

The aim is for contact to be made with four different members - preferably 60%ers - during the assessment period. This can include conversation and professional interaction. If the instructor only makes contact with two members, only two points would be scored.

D – Demonstrating professional interaction

Again there should be at least four interactions in the evaluation period. Things like WOW!AM, corrections, coaching, cross-selling, program changes, intensity checks and explanations of machines are all classified as professional interaction.

E – Entrance and exit

While within the greeting zone² the instructor should be saying hello and goodbye to members as appropriate. Start with giving four points and deduct one point each time this does not happen when it should have.

F – Friendly intros - giving name or introducing themselves

If you can see the instructor shaking hands and introducing themselves to members they don't know or you can overhear this happening give them a point. If they haven't scored their point that way ask them to name a percentage of members in the gym at the time (i.e. your standard may be 80% in a smaller facility, but lower for larger facilities with thousands of member).

1. Flags are the metaphorical clues or cues that members give when they are working out. For example, a 'danger' flag may be someone looking white and wobbly, a 'new member' flag may be someone you haven't seen before looking at their program card and a 'conversation' flag may be someone with a suntan in the middle of winter wearing a t-shirt from Barbados.
2. The greeting zone is an 'invisible' zone in your entrance area. All instructors should know its boundaries. When an instructor is in this zone it is compulsory for them to say 'hello' and 'goodbye' to everyone entering or leaving. If they are conversing with a member, a wave or smile will suffice.

Table 4: KODAK MOMENT EXAMPLE

								Comments
A	Awareness & positioning	0	1	2	3			
B	Body language, uniform facial expression	0	1	2	3			
C	Contact with members			1	2	3	4	
D	Demonstrating professional interaction			1	2	3	4	
E	Entrance/Exit – lose 1 point for failing to greet/farewell when possible			1	2	3	4	
F	Friendly intros – giving their name or introducing themselves			1	2			
Feedback given: Yes/No						TOTAL: /20		

Six fundamentals to improved floor interaction

1. Don't call time on the gym floor 'floating', 'walking' or 'free time'. Call it 'working the floor' or 'member contact time' - something that suggests what it is that you want to happen.
2. If possible, timetable instructors should work the floor when they are fresh. Have one-to-one appointments towards the end of their shift or when they are likely to be winding down.
3. When interviewing potential instructors, include some opportunity for them to mix with gym users and observe how comfortable they are when making contact with people they don't know. Explain that this is a key part of their job.
4. In your job description put 'pro-active contact with gym users' up at the top of the list ahead of 'prescribing safe and effective program' or 'cleaning and maintaining equipment'. This gives it the priority it deserves.
5. Ensure your instructors have all been trained in basic body language skills to make certain they are portraying an approachable, welcoming and friendly attitude.
6. Spend a lot of time working on the skill of remembering names with your team. You might like to equip instructors with small notebooks and have them note the name and details of one member per shift. ■

Table 5: WOW!AM LOG

Name of instructor Annabelle Target: *5 per shift*
 Week beginning date: *20th Nov*

Name of member	Date	Activity	Member Info
Jodie	20/11/06	Rower -1000m	Just joined. 24. Wants to do 10km
Marilyn	20/11/06	Abds & stretching	Bad shoulder. Husband is Brian
Gary Ross	20/11/06	Walked with him 5 mins	Might try spinning. Welsh. Teacher
Olivia Forbes	20/11/06	Rower 500m then abds	Aiming to lose 10kg. Bridesmaid in January
Jack	20/11/06	Dumbbell exercises	Been a member one year. Friend of Henry

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