

Tips to Market Your Program for Fall Enrollment

By Marje Kiley

If you own the gym, you probably do the marketing for your facility. So, when everyone else starts to wind down in the spring and is looking forward to the summer months, you are at your busiest! By August 1, your fall enrollment should be underway so you need to know the full details about staffing, marketing, scheduling and pricing early enough to get your fall marketing executed.

If you're an old pro at running your gym, then you're probably fine-tuning a system that you have working smoothly. If you're new to gym ownership or if something in your market or business necessitates an overhaul, there is a tremendous amount of work to be done.

The most important work happens in your head and in the pre-work that you do with key staff and outside advisors to set the stage for the final plans and marketing package. Part of the value of small business is the individuality that an entrepreneur brings to the company. Still, it's a good idea to start with a team and take advantage of the ideas that are brought forth.

If you were a major corporation, you would have an internal marketing group reviewing the business competition, the changes in the market place and what worked in past marketing efforts. You would have an ad agency, a market research firm, a media placement service, a design house and probably a public relations consultant. Well, guess what, at your business all these things depend on you!

Take this seriously. It's your most important contribution to the bottom line. No one else will initiate a thorough annual business review and marketing plan but you. This is especially true, because many of the benefits are hard to measure.

You can measure the cost of marketing versus the new student dollars and decide if it paid off. You can start a new program and see how fast it grows due to the marketing and exposure you gave it. You can market improvements to a program that is dwindling and save it. It is more difficult to see the long term value of name recognition for your business. It's harder to measure the reputation you have based on the kinds of things you present to the public. Hopefully, what you do in writing enhances what is happening on your gym floor.

It's difficult to measure the importance of increasing the gross in a year when it doesn't end up putting more in your pocket.

If you really can't see any benefit in something, then don't do it. After all you don't have the time and money to waste. However, keep in mind that marketing is an investment in your public image and builds in value over time. Make sure your message is consistent and your business supports your promises.

Attached are some questions to help you decide what needs your attention and how to market your gym this year. If you're ready to roll this year, CONGRATULATIONS! If this gives you a push to get ready, GREAT!

If you want someone to talk to about your plans, ask your coaches, parents, gym owner friends in other cities, your USA Gymnastics Club Membership resources, or someone from outside the gymnastics community to gain perspective.

Resources For Local Help Include:

- Advertising agencies and graphic designers in your community that might want to trade some work for free lessons for their child.
- University marketing departments looking for intern opportunities for business or marketing students.
- Local printers that want your business and will share ideas.
- Parents with jobs in fields related to marketing, public relations, general business.
- Local groups like the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, Better Business Bureau, and Small Business Support Services.
- Of course many in the gymnastics community offer helpful courses and seminars such as Jeff Metzger's Club Owner Boot Camp, Tom Burgdorf's Gymnet Membership, and Lorée Galimore USA Gymnastics Member Club Manager has helpful information as well.
- If radio and TV is right for your business, the stations have people that will help you design your advertising.
- If a block ad makes sense in the Yellow Pages of the phone directory, Donnelly has graphic designers that will help you!
- Look on the Internet. There's more there than you can use. Start with search engines like Marketing, Small Business Marketing, Business Plans, Marketing to Children, Youth Marketing, etc. Look for ideas that stimulate you and find your own answers that suit your business.

Questions to consider before setting up your marketing plan!

- What are the elements of a total marketing plan that I need to think about?
How shall I prioritize them?
- Do I have the niche I want in the market place? What niche do I want and can I justify my business deserves it?
- Where do my clientele come from? What income class? How far do they drive?
Boys/Girls, Ages, Programs? Schools represented?
- What programs are doing well?
- What programs aren't doing well and why do people leave?
- How do my students find me?
 - Word of Mouth?
 - Yellow Pages?
 - Exhibitions?
 - Meets/media coverage?
 - Direct mail marketing?
 - TV, radio, coupon mail
 - Other
- When a student/parent arrives with expectations, does my current program offerings meet their needs? How long do I retain the average student?
- Do I have enough staff available to grow/ respond to successful marketing? Do I have enough gym space to grow? Can I get more space and/or coaches?
- Is my pricing competitive and set for next year? Do I need to spend marketing

time positioning any price changes?

- Could I better utilize my staff with a larger enrollment? If I grow will I improve the bottom line? Grow how much?
- Do I have new equipment or programs that would enhance my business image if the public knew about them?
- Can I get the work done to make the gym, the programs and the staff live up to the expectations created by my efforts?

Setting Up the Actual Plan

Have I organized my business into units of sale that the public can grasp and get excited about?

If you organize so that you offer recreational and competitive, you make a different statement to the public than if your organizational units are preschool motor development, age group, fitness, high school cheerleading, and a variety of competitive options for those interested. The key is to be sure you have every program in some organizational structure that you can sell and explain easily.

For the Fall marketing, am I going to market the business, the sign up process, the program improvements, the benefits of the sports I offer, etc

. The answer here has to do with what you think will bring kids into your gym. If your community is familiar with the sport and your club and you are trying to get them to come to you vs. the new gym down the road, then marketing improvements and how easy it is to sign up may be the best choices. Whatever you decide, keep it simple with one or, at most, two messages. Don't try to be all things. Do a winter campaign or plan a year round approach that does it all. With your customers, make the sale as quickly as you can and be sure that all the pieces of your marketing plan say the same thing this season and stays on strategy over the long term, project to project.

How can I best communicate my message

? You have to look at how much money and time you have to work with and how many kids you want to attract. City wide TV advertising that draws from outside your normal demographic market and is expensive and creates waiting lists may not be smart. Communities that are in higher income groups may respond to a high quality direct mail piece and fax or email registrations systems. Look at everything from telemarketing by your coaches to re-sign up last year's students to grocery store demos and radio ads. Get to be in the back-to-school newspaper issue and any allowed school newsletters. Consider visiting the summer/fall soccer teams and hand out flyers to the parents. Make a plan, decide your message and find the ways to get it said.

Can I afford the time and money to do this plan?

Maybe the first year you write out a plan and choose to do one piece of it. Maybe you get parent volunteers to help you get more done. Maybe you don't coach this summer and set your fall sales on fire. Maybe you spend an extra \$1000 on upgrading your stationary, logo, fall material package and staff sales skills and change the whole image of the business. Bite off a piece you can chew. Any of it will help if you have a consistent message-consistent with your actual business when they walk in the door, and consistent in everything you do

to market and sell your programs.

Do you have your staff on track to make this work?

Before the staff starts selling fall registrations on the phones, make your sales pitch to your own staff during a staff meeting. Express the message and let them be a part of it. If you can't sell your staff, they can't sell your gym. If they know what you're promising your classes will be, they can make their classes live up to the expectations. If you upgrade the stationary and get a new logo, put the logo on new staff shirts and make them feel like professionals. Should they have business cards? Should they have post cards to follow up with a personal touch with students from last year? Get your staff on your team!

Make a list of selling ideas that you feel fits your strategy and continue to add to the list. Here are some examples:

- We have state-of-the-art equipment for age group gymnastics.
- We have a spring floor for dancers.
- We have the lowest student-teacher ratios.
- We have the safest mats to learn lifts and tumbling for cheerleaders.
- Dance enhances posture and poise.
- Gymnastics teaches self confidence and overcoming failure.
- Gymnastics teaches safe landing and falling for other sports.
- Tumbling agility makes you a better ball player.
- Our team kids know that happiness comes before winning...the child comes first.

Have a big staff meeting and brainstorm these ideas with no criticism. Then go back and look at the list for those strategies that make sense for your plan. If the staff is sold on the selling ideas and feel good about them, they will be on your team and follow up with the same messages in their classes.

Just remember to be consistent in your overall marketing message. Your stationary, staff vocabulary, uniforms, cleanliness of the gym, quality of lesson plans and other key factors should be of the same consistent message.

Here's another idea... fast food restaurants group themselves on corners to attract their customers. Clubs can't do that, but there are other ways to get together with the clubs in your area and build the sport as a whole by doing cooperative advertising. This makes TV ads affordable as a group. For example, you could do a gymnastics fair in the town center or host a City Championship, designed so every club wins something. Find a way to form a cooperative effort and build relationships that help all of you.

Drafting a Marketing Plan For the Year

Drafting a marketing plan for your gym should be an important process that you work through each year. We've developed a marketing plan for Club XYZ as an example. Each club's marketing plan should look a little different depending on how you do business. After reading Club XYZ's marketing plan perhaps you can come up with your own plan!

Define your business as a product for sale.

Club XYZ has preschool, age group, cheer, and dance classes. They are selling sports opportunities for all ages.

Define your target audience, location, male/ female, ages, income class, very specific things for your club.

CLUB XYZ's target audience lives in a suburb within a 30 mile radius from the gym; attracts boys and girls ages 1-18 of middle class families; all religions are represented; and there are very few stay at home moms.

What will your club be known as?

o Club XYZ will market to be known as the club that has something for everyone through high school years.

What is the proof of your claim?

Proof of this will be the diversity of our program, equal time and attention from staff for all ages and programs, and choices at every level.

Define the tone of your advertising.

The tone of our advertising and sales will be professional, open-minded and upbeat.

We've also roughed out a sample annual plan then coded the target groups as follows: 1 = all clients, 2 = preschool, 3 = age group, 4 = cheer, 5 = dance, etc.

Sample of Program for a Start Up

MO.	ADVERTISING	PROMOTION	SALES EFFORT	PUBLIC RELATIONS
Jan	local newspaper ad (3)		phone research why quit? (5)	local paper article (3) dance recital (5)
Feb		bring a friend (2)	come back call (5)	open house valentine party (2)
Mar		sign up friend get T-shirt		national gymnastics event on TV (1)
Apr	summer (3) TV/radio offer	Gymnastics magazine ad (3)		mall exhibitions (1)
May		early summer registration discount	post card (2, 3, 5) progress reports	spring open house demos (1)
June	summer newspaper ads (1)	summer toy offer (2)		

July	fall registration direct mail	National Gymnastics Day promotion (1)	visit school PE teachers	National Gymnastics Day coverage (1)
Aug.	local paper ads (1)	soccer field coupon drops (3)	phone students (1)	mall demo/registration desk (1)
Sept.	update yellow pages (1)	hand out party information (2, 5)	post card regist. when necessary (1)	Radio interview for team (1)
Oct.		party coupon drawings (1)	return to soccer fields/flyers (5)	print meet schedule in newspaper (1)
Nov.		TV coverage	celebrity turkey event with prizes costumes, visitors	
Dec.	Holiday Camp ads in newspaper (3)	Holiday party with guests (2)	New Year Party invites (4)	Happy New Year cards (1)

Marje Kiley, from Cincinnati, grew up in our gymnastics "family" and owned her first multi-sport club in 1978. Her career includes developing sports-based businesses (that she has since sold) and several years in marketing at Procter & Gamble. Over the last 15 years she has maintained a presence in the sports world as a small and new sports business marketing consultant. Her clientele include private clubs and government programs in the USA and globally as well as work for major U.S. Fortune 500 corporations.

This article appears in the July 1999 issue of *Technique*, Vol. 19, No. 7.