

PREPARING FOR THE OLYMPIC ENROLLMENT BOOM

RAISING THE VALUE OF YOUR CLASSES AND CUSTOMER SERVICE

By Jeff Lulla, President Fun & Fit Gymnastics

When the expectations and perceptions we create in our advertising and public relations (our external image) are not met when clients step within our doors, we have a problem. People can accept many things, including apologies when things go wrong. They will understand that errors can occur and mistakes happen. But, if they feel like they were deceived or misled, if their expectations are not met, they will lose trust - and that can be the downfall of any business.

As the Olympics approach, it is everyone's job in the gymnastics industry to educate parents to appreciate the many benefits that gymnastics provides to children, as well as how safe a quality gymnastics program can be for kids.

Very often, when a prospective customer calls your gym for information, what they "think they want" is the cheapest and most convenient class they can find for their child. Gymnastics professionals know that investing in safety, instructor training, sanitation, customer service and quality drives the cost of classes up. We also know that the most convenient class may not be the most educationally appropriate class. This makes it very difficult to compete in price with a gym that doesn't invest in safety and quality unless parents are educated to appreciate the difference.

The uninformed parent, shopping for the best bargain and convenience, often thinks that all gymnastics programs are the same. While nobody wants to spend more than is necessary, most people will spend more if they know they are getting greater value for their money.

There are two parts to our business's image development. They are:

1. The External Image - the image and general impression that people have of your business from your marketing, advertising and public relations, but without experiencing your business directly.
2. The Internal Image - the image of your business that people have when they first make contact with you by calling and/or stepping within your doors and experience your business. This involves your people and customer service procedures, policies and office systems, your documentation, facility and equipment, and your curriculum and teaching systems.

THE EXTERNAL IMAGE - ADVERTISING & PUBLIC RELATIONS

You must purposefully manage the external image through your advertising and public relations. Advertising is a product of cost while public relations is a product of time. Either way you look at it, we are talking about an investment. A very important and necessary investment. Ultimately, if you do not invest in managing your external image, the people who talk about your business, will manage it for you. And keep in mind, people talk more when they are upset than when they are happy.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

Since a new business on a tight budget usually can't afford to spend much on advertising, it is important to spend time on public relations. There are several suggestions I have in this area.

Develop Relationships - It is very important to get to know business and community leaders in your town. Some of the best ways to do this are:

1. **The Chamber of Commerce** - Become an ACTIVE member on one of their committees (I recommend the Education Committee). Attend their monthly "mixers" and shake a lot of hands. Make sure that they see you as a valuable community businessperson. Ask about their "Partnership Program" with the local schools and offer to support it.
2. **The Local Newspaper** - Walk right in and introduce yourself. Offer to take a reporter, or the editor, out to lunch or to your gym to educate them on what your business is all about and how many lives you have an impact on. Let them know in advance about all the special events you will be hosting, and that cute kids make great photo opportunities. Offer to submit articles to the paper on parenting, fitness, or gymnastics. Remember, you are a local expert or you would not be doing what you're doing.
3. **The Local Schools and PTA** - Introduce yourself to the Principal of each school. Let them know that you are also dealing with their students and that you care about the quality of their education. Offer to do free assemblies and demonstrations to educate the

students about fitness and self-esteem. Offer to become a "Partner" and support them with donations of free gymnastics for teachers to use to reward students for good work and behavior.

4. **Civic Participation** - If the Park and Recreation Department in your town is holding a 10K Run or an event of some kind, offer to provide gymnastics entertainment and professional assistance. When the City Council holds a groundbreaking ceremony, BE THERE. Make yourself present at the local functions, and don't forget to dress for the occasion (gym clothes may be your work uniform, but everyone else wears a dress or coat and tie).



Donate Free Gymnastics - Let it be known that you can be relied upon to donate free gymnastics scholarships for local fund raising groups to auction or raffle at their events. This promotes your business, creates a perception of value to your service, and brings new people in to try your program that otherwise may never have sought you out. After all, if you are doing your teaching job well, you will get these scholarship students hooked on gymnastics and they will become long term paying clients when their scholarship runs out. (I recommend your donations to be one month free, and given out in a professionally printed certificate form). Make it your duty to never say "No" when asked for help, and encourage more opportunities to give.

- **Give Clients A Referral Fee For Telling A Friend Who Enrolls** - Most people enroll due to a friend's recommendation. It is always a nice gesture, and a great incentive investment, to thank clients for referring their friends to your gym by giving them a discount on their next tuition payment. I have found \$10.00 off on their next payment to be effective.

ADVERTISING

There are many advertising choices available to us today. Tracking results is the most important thing that you can do when investing in anything - **and advertising is an investment. You are literally buying clients.** You must move your advertising money around to see what works for you in your community. Keep doing what works and stop doing what doesn't work, no matter how cheap it is, or how effective you thought the advertising would be.

Fun & Fit Gymnastics tracks results by asking every walk-in and caller how they found out about us. Our enrollment form asks this same question.

In designing and laying out your ad, try these basic advertising guidelines and suggestions:

1. **Create An Ad That Catches The Readers Eye.** We are fortunate that we can use photos of happy children in our advertising. I am amazed at the number of gymnastics businesses across the country

that fail to take advantage of this incredible opportunity. A photo can say so much about what is going on that you simply can't say in words. A good photo will show fun, learning, socialization, professional supervision, age and gender of students, level of program(s) offered, facility and equipment. And the prospect gets it all in a split second without reading one word! The phone number should be easy to find. There should be lots of open space so the eye enjoys looking at the ad.

2. **Be Consistent.** Your ad may need to be seen several times before a prospect takes action. Perhaps they like what they see but are not able to enroll for several weeks. Your ad appearing again and looking similar will be recognized. Avoid changing photos or the general appearance of the ad.
3. **Ask For Action.** Provide some incentive for them to act now. A discount coupon with a deadline is a great motivator. This will also help you to track results and see how effective your ad is. One FREE month with two months paid enrollment has been very effective for me.
4. **Sell Benefits Over Features.** In our business, saying "the student/teacher ratio is 8 to 1" may be a feature that means nothing to the parent. But if you say "classes are small so every child receives lots of personal attention and many turns on the apparatus" the parent will recognize that as important and of value. Selling benefits should be the focus of your advertising.
5. **Remove Risk From The Purchase.** By providing a money back guarantee, you remove all risk of enrolling that a parent may have. Of course, you must have faith in your operation enough to justify the belief that your program is worth what you are charging in tuition. And you must have a belief about people in general that most of them are not out to take advantage of you. But then again, if your program is truly great, they will not want to take their child out just to get something for nothing.

WHAT HAS WORKED FOR ME

Yellow page advertising - When your business is young, and you don't have a reputation in the community, you literally have to buy one. It's important to be in every book and have the dominant ad in each. Keep in mind that everything you do in Advertising and Public Relations is focused on getting a prospect to call you. Most of the time, even when they call due to word of mouth, they usually look your number up in the yellow pages. And your competitor's phone numbers are right next to yours. If you were a parent, wouldn't you call the others for information if their ad looked interesting?



IMAGINATION
"We Build Children From The Inside!"
4605 Industrial St. 303
Simi Valley, CA 93063
805/581-4496



Here are two examples of gymnastics school ads.

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Local Direct Mail Coupons - "Val Pak" or "Money Mailer" have been effective for me in varying degrees depending on what I am saying in the ad and what I'm giving away. The most effective ad to date offers one month free with a two month paid enrollment. It also has our Mission Statement (which clearly communicates our philosophy) and our 100% money back guarantee (which removes any risk from the decision to try us out). Color photos of happy kids are dominant and, whenever possible, visible through a window in the envelope.

Target Market Media Ads - In Los Angeles there is a publication called "L.A. Parent" which is geared towards parents of young children. I was a regular advertiser in this publication for over 7 years. I no longer continue to advertise with them since the maturity of the business no longer requires it, and the cost to advertise has gone up due to expanded circulation outside my service area. (Never pay for wasted advertising in areas outside your service area)

In-House Mailing List - It took several years to develop a computer base of significant size to be effective, but the wait was worth it. Every caller, every person who attends a birthday party, every person who sees our Demonstration Teams perform at a local event (and fills out a card for a drawing to win free gymnastics) goes into our computer. At this time we use this list to mail cards two months prior to the child's birthday inviting them to have their party at our facility. This is very effective, and brings in many new students.



Advertising Specialties - T-shirts are given free to every new student at the time of enrollment. Our annual registration fee more than covers the cost of the shirt. This is a great advertising tool. Nothing is better than having children in your community doing cartwheels all over the place wearing your gym logo.

The Internet - Every day more people rely on the Internet to find answers to their questions. Children are introduced to "The Net" in school. And with new technology already available, the Internet is being integrated into living room television as another option for families' attention and entertainment as well as a source of information. Being on the Internet is quickly becoming as important as being in the yellow pages. In fact, if you are in the yellow pages today, you are probably already on the Internet in your local phone book's On-Line listings.

With the help of USA Gymnastics, advertising on the Internet has been successful for Fun & Fit Gymnastics in getting the word out about the Curriculum Poster Reward System we have licensed to hundreds of gymnastics schools since 1991. We have a web page for our two facilities in the Los Angeles area as well as our licensing program, and a link to our web site from the USA Gymnastics Member Club listing.

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:

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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?" is more effective than "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.

4. 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.

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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 not be 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 proofread 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.

Jeff has two Fun & Fit Gymnastics Centers, one in Burbank and one in Santa Clarita, CA. Both gyms contract with private schools and their local city Park and Rec. Departments teaching gymnastics both on and off site. As a member of the USAG National Preschool Committee, Jeff co-authored the KAT Course, and is a National KAT Instructor, a member of the USAG National Safety Review Board and a National Safety Instructor for USA Gymnastics. He licenses Fun and Fit, a self-esteem building curriculum. In addition Jeff is an industry consultant.