

IGNITE THE FIRE

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Jonathan Goodman, CSCS

The Secrets
of a **Successful**
Personal Training Career

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Chapter 5

One on One: Developing Client Relationships

“The creation of a thousand forests is in one acorn.” - Ralph Waldo Emerson

Your relationship with your client starts the first time you interact with that person. Maybe you greeted her at the gym. Maybe you had a brief conversation with him in the weight room. Or maybe your first conversation was when he approached you about hiring you to train him.

But once a client hires you, your trainer/client relationship officially begins. Create a strong bond from the start, and you'll not only help your clients achieve their goals—you'll find that happy clients are more than willing to recommend you and refer friends, family members, and colleagues to you.

You probably already know that it takes much more time to sign a new client or customer than to retain a current one. So keep this fact in mind: *The work to build a strong bond with a client pales in comparison to the work involved in continually attracting and signing new clients.*

Breaking the Ice

Developing great relationships with a client starts with getting to know them on a personal level, but most clients seem reluctant to open up early on. So how do you quickly break down the barriers a client puts up?

First, listen. You learned last chapter that it's important to listen to a potential client during the selling process. Now that you're training your client, it's even more important. Ask your client how he's feeling, or how his day has been. Small talk can help break the ice as you start a training session. Often clients are anxious or feel awkward; they're not trying to be rude. Don't take it personally. As your client gets to know you better, chances are good that he or she will become more open with you.

I find that clients let down some of their barriers when I tell a semi-embarrassing or funny story about my own life. It eases the tension and shows that I'm human. I recommend keeping a couple of

stories in reserve at all times. The best stories are those that relate to the gym (for example, being unable to press a too-heavy weight at the bottom of a bench press, and calling somebody else to lift the bar off of you).

Sharing this kind of personal experience reminds clients that everybody struggles with exercise and they shouldn't be afraid to fail. In fact, they should embrace failure. (Later, when I discuss the physiology of skill acquisition, you will understand why "failing with purpose" is imperative to your client's success.)

One of my favourite stories to use is to describe my first experience curling. The short version is that *I found I lacked curling skills. In fact, the first time I tried it, I fell on the ice, bruised my hip, and walked with a limp for two weeks! This story shows clients that personal trainers struggle with new exercise endeavours too. Reminding clients of that can help reduce anxiety.*

As a trainer, pay attention not only to your client's words but body language and actions as well. You can learn a lot about someone's personality and comfort level just by watching how she interacts with you and with other people. As you get to know your client better, you'll be better able to figure out what will motivate and inspire her [you'll learn more about that in chapter 8] but at the outset, you want to create a relationship of trust. To help create a great relationship early, I suggest these techniques:

- Smile. To paraphrase Dale Carnegie, a smile lets clients know you're happy to see them.
- Make eye contact. That lets clients know you're interested in what they have to say, and that they're important to you.
- Use isopraxism, or mimicking behaviour. This nonverbal and usually subconscious behaviour helps establish rapport and empathy. It means you follow your client's lead; if she speaks softly, so do you. If he laughs, you laugh as well.
- Stay on their level. Body positioning is important. For example, if your client is sitting on a bench and you want to speak to her, get on her level by crouching next to her. Never "talk down" to a client.

5 Simple Ways to Create Client Relationships

Want to build loyal, lasting relationships with clients? Use these five strategies:

#1: Educate them.

Most of your clients will come to you knowing little about fitness. Indoctrinate them into the workout culture. Teach them the jargon. Tell them what words like set, rep, hypertrophy, and even RDL (short for Romanian deadlift) mean. Make sure that they know why they're doing the primary exercises and what energy system they're developing.

Smart clients are confident clients, and they'll jump at the opportunity to tell their friends and family that they performed 2 sets of 8 reps of the deadlift—which was aptly named because it was developed in ancient Rome to lift the dead off of the battlefield.

Educated clients also feel more part of the gym. Retention will increase, and your clients will be less likely to “relapse” back into inactivity.

#2: Welcome them.

Make your clients part of the gym community. Introduce them to all of the staff and their fellow members; they should be the most popular people in the gym. When they feel comfortable, they're likely to chat other members up—and guess what they'll be talking about? Their great trainer!

Clients who feel welcome in the gym stay longer, plain and simple. The gym becomes a place not only to work out, but also a place to socialize and have fun. And the longer they're in the gym, the more likely they are to become part of your “client army” and spread the word about you to anyone who will listen. They may even go out of their way to bring in friends and family not just because they enjoy the gym, but also because they want to show off their popularity.

Training Tip: Build your army by making your clients popular. They will chat up new members for you, stay longer, and bring more people into the club.

Strategy #3: Surprise them.

You probably already know that you should “touch” your clients regularly by sending thoughtful emails such as restaurant recommendations or new studies they may be interested in. This is a great idea, but you’ll make a bigger impression if you don’t mention it in advance.

When I’m training someone and get the idea to send a client a relevant article, for example, I make a note on my clipboard and continue the workout. The next day, I send the email, saying something like, “I thought you would enjoy this—it’s what we were speaking about yesterday.”

That makes a bigger impact than telling your client you’ll send her something and then keeping your word. The surprise effect keeps you in your clients’ minds even during off days and shows that you think of them outside of training hours. (You know you’re developing a good relationship when clients send *you* funny jokes, restaurant advice, or relevant articles on *their* off days!)

Training Tip: Build your army by using the power of surprise to show that you’re willing to go the extra 10 percent.

Strategy #4: Celebrate them.

Each month, I give one client an award that I’ve developed. The award is given to a client who has gone above and beyond, training-wise. I give the person a badge with his name on it that he can keep, and profile him on my website, highlighting his accomplishments.

I highly recommend you develop a similar award for your clients. I’ve found that since I started the monthly badge, my clients work harder and cancel fewer workouts. They all want to win! The result? They all reach their goals faster.

The award also brings my clients together and creates a sense of community and healthy competition among them. I’ve found that clients show off their badges, and email their friends about their write-ups, which means more exposure for me as they reach their goals. Giving out well-deserved awards can be win/win for you as a trainer.

Strategy #5: Empower them.

When you do a great job, your clients will want to spread the word about their results—and about you. Make it easy for them by always having business cards on hand, and make sure your clients always have them, too.

You should also have something in writing—say, a brief bio and a description of the services that you offer. Include client testimonials and any specialties, and offer it to clients. You should also have your brochure or pamphlet available for download on your (and your company's) website.

Training Tip: Make it easy for your clients to pass on info about you to their contacts.

Handling Prior Negative Experiences

In the coming chapters you'll learn about getting your clients excited about working out and about exercise programming and progression. But let me address an important issue here—what to do when a client has had a bad experience with a trainer in the past.

It may have been that the trainer's style just didn't work for the client, that the trainer didn't give the client enough attention, that the client was injured, or that the trainer simply didn't listen to the client. Regardless, make sure that you know what happened before, and don't repeat it! Communicate that to your client. You might say something like, "What happened before was the past, and we can't change that. What we can change, though, is the future. So let's focus our energy on your journey moving forward." Or, you might say, "I understand that you don't feel like your previous trainer listened to you. Well, the more information that I know about you the better, so please do not hold anything back! My clients will tell you that one of the reasons they train with me is because I pay close attention to them, and I assure you that you'll find this to be true."

Often a client may have felt ignored or taken for granted by a trainer. If you suspect this is the case, show the person you're different. Surprise them with an email, or go the "extra 10 percent" with a handout that shows you've been thinking about them.

Training Tip: Make sure clients know that you're different, and that you won't repeat any problems they had with trainers in the past.

Inside Info – Scott Tate

Scott Tate is a personal trainer in Toronto specializing in chronic disease clients, specifically fibromyalgia, chronic lyme disease, and Parkinson's. He also heads up the continuing education department for a multi-gym company in Toronto.

Scott began his career by volunteering in physiotherapy clinics throughout high school and university. Helping friends in the gym and in sport led him to a job at the University of Guelph's Athletic Center in Ontario, Canada. After finishing his Human Kinetics degree, Scott stayed on at university to study Applied Human Nutrition. He left after two years to embark on a career in personal training.

He has worked in boutique-style training facilities and trained clients in-home. He started a company with the sole purpose of connecting practitioners to provide well-rounded inter-professional care. When Scott realized he needed more space and better focused attention from his clients, he moved to a boutique training gym in Toronto. His business is referral-based through clients that he's already helped and other health-care practitioners he's connected with.

Scott's 3 keys to succeeding as a personal trainer are:

1. Be passionate about helping people – If you don't care, neither will they. If you're in this only for the paycheck it will show. Passion rubs off. Potential clients can sense it and will immediately be drawn to you while existing clients will never want to leave.
2. Have patience and empathy – We never truly know what's going on in our clients lives. Stressors beyond our control get in the way of their workouts. If you want to help your clients patience and empathy goes a long way.
3. Know that neither you, nor any system, is perfect – Continually improve. Strive to get better and never be satisfied. Preventative medicine is still young but it's the most powerful drug ever designed. Keeping up to date with methods will ensure you stay on top.

Scott's words to live by:

“Are you in this to help people or to help your bank? If it's the people that pump you up, the bank will do its thing. If it's dollars that drive you, take another route.”

Scott Tate is a personal trainer and kinesiologist. He currently sits on the board for the Ontario Kinesiology Association and is the continuing education coach for Body + Soul Fitness. He can be reached at Scott@bodyandsoul.ca

Every Client Counts

I'd like to share an example of how strong client relationships pay off, not only for them (they reach their goals!) but for you as a trainer, too. I started training Cindy years ago. Cindy was in her 60s and suffered from shoulder and knee pain and wanted to lose some weight. While she'd tried numerous exercise programs, she had no gym experience.

I initially focused on creating a comfortable gym environment for Cindy, and within a few months, she was already feeling stronger and fitter. She referred her friend Pam to me. Like Cindy, Pam too had no gym experience and was apprehensive about working with a trainer. They asked if they could train together, and I agreed. I educated them about what we were doing, introduced them to other gym members, and kept in touch with them when they weren't in the gym.

They both had their share of aches, pains, and doubts, but they stuck with the program and started to progress. Within weeks, they were noticing how much stronger they were, not only at the gym but at home as well. Pam was glowing when she walked into the gym one day, and announced that she had climbed up on a ladder—something she hadn't done in years. And Cindy, who'd had some mobility issues, stood up one day without holding onto anything, and didn't even realize it until she was already up! These accomplishments (what I call “aha!” moments, which I'll talk about next chapter) kept them motivated.

Today Pam and Cindy are strong, fit, and healthy, and have become members of my client army. Both continually send friends and colleagues to me. (At one point, about two-thirds of my clients were direct referrals from either Pam or Cindy! That's how much of an impact they had on my success.)

But here's my point. Personal training success goes outside the boundaries of technical knowledge. Lots of qualified trainers could have helped them get in better shape. But I was unique because I made the experience *comfortable* for them. Because of that, they both achieved goals they thought were beyond them. And they now look forward to the gym!

Training Tip: Your client relationships are your number 1 priority. Develop them and enjoy them—that's what will make you or break you in business.

Keeping in Touch

You spend just a few hours out of the week with any client, so staying in touch through methods other than face-to-face is important. At the moment, I manage 6 email accounts, 2 Facebook accounts, 2 phone lines, and I use Twitter and text messaging as well. I personally answer all messages from clients, friends, colleagues, readers of the PTDC, and media/advertising inquires. It's a lot to keep track of, and I'm currently consolidating how I connect with clients.

Your clients will dictate how you keep in touch, but you should always be easy to reach. Here's how I stay in contact:

- **Text messaging.** Text messaging is by far the most common way I keep in touch with my clients. Text messages are quick, easy, and garner fast responses.
- **Email.** Email plays a similar role for me; I use it when I have a longer message to send to a client, or to pass along relevant articles a client may be interested in.
- **Phone.** The phone is the best way to truly connect with your client and the best way for consulting with a potential client. Unless you're scheduling an appointment, the phone should be your communication method of choice as it's more immediate and gives you a chance to ask about how a client's day is going. When a client gives you a potential referral, get that person on the phone as quick as possible and start compiling all of the information you need to make the sale. The window of opportunity might be small if you don't build the relationship immediately.

What about Social Media?

Social media is one of the most efficient and effective ways to keep in touch with clients; here's a brief overview of how you can use it to your advantage:

- **Facebook.** I hold both personal and public Facebook accounts; the personal account is limited to my close friends and family. However, I have about 2,500 friends on my public account who represent a cross-section of clients, colleagues, and trainers from throughout the world. My public account has been a great place not only to interact with my current clients but also to generate

referrals. When a client reaches a goal, I congratulate him on Facebook and “tag” him in the post so it shows up on his wall. When I run group classes, I take photos and post them on Facebook, tagging each participant congratulating them on their efforts. Facebook is a great community-builder for client and an easy way to keep up with their birthdays and other special events.

- **LinkedIn.** Most of my clients are professionals and almost all of them have LinkedIn accounts. I created my own account, added my clients, and asked some of them for recommendations. LinkedIn takes little or no maintenance; it’s a place where potential clients can get a quick snapshot of you and read testimonials. If you don’t have a website yet, LinkedIn should be your calling card.
- **Twitter.** I use Twitter for professionally networking but haven’t found it useful for connecting with clients. Only 3 of my clients follow me. I do however mention those three in tweets when I can.
- **Blogging.** If you have time to create and maintain a blog, it can help you get your message out and stay connected with clients. You can set up a blog and host it for free on sites like wordpress.com. Your blog can be a calling card for you, and let you go the extra 10 percent for clients. You can post your favourite recipe, write about new research, or provide instructions on completing a difficult exercise, for example. Blogging can also be a fun way to express yourself, but keep your posts positive and on point. Rants won’t do you any good.

Respecting Client/Trainer Boundaries

In a field like personal training, where you work in close physical proximity, it’s important that you understand the importance of setting appropriate boundaries. First, I advise you to use your intuition. If you feel uncomfortable with a client, address the situation right away.

Always avoid sexual innuendo or other comments that could be misconstrued by a client. If a *client* uses innuendo during a workout or otherwise makes you uncomfortable, pointedly ignore it the first time. Often the client will feel awkward and refrain in the future. If a client persists in making lewd or inappropriate comments, however, ask the person to stop. If the behaviour continues, speak to your

manager (if you have one) and ask to have the client reassigned. If you work for yourself, you may simply have to “fire” your client. No client is worth risking your reputation.

While a lot of clients (including me) use text messaging as the method of choice to communicate with clients, it should be used with care. Text messages should be kept professional and to the point; I only use them to quickly confirm a session or schedule a session. If a client texts you at odd hours (such as late at night), I suggest you respond during regular business hours or send an email in reply. It’s a subtle way of training your client to respect your privacy. Or call the client instead.

Then there’s Facebook. Clients will want to be your friends on Facebook, so you can either make yourself unsearchable (controlling who sees your profile), or you can set up two accounts, a public one with your real name and a private profile with an assumed name. Your public profile should be kept *very* professional. Monitor what people write on your wall and remove anything controversial, keep your status updates appropriate, and remember that employers often look at Facebook accounts as part of the hiring process.

There’s nothing wrong with grabbing a quick bite to eat with a client after a workout or meeting over a cup of coffee for a change of scenery. This can strengthen your relationship with a client, but I suggest you avoid encounters that could appear inappropriate, like having dinner alone with a member of the opposite sex. If you’re invited, just say “no” or ask permission to bring your significant other. That should send the right message to your client.

What if...

So, what if you have feelings for a client that you want to act on? Stop training the person immediately. Pursuing a romantic relationship with a client is a sticky subject and could potentially have legal ramifications, so always err on the side of caution.

Training Tip: Understand the professional relationship that exists between you and your client, and make sure that you don’t send the wrong message to your client (or anyone else) by your behaviour.

Points to Remember

- It takes less time to create lasting relationships with current clients than to constantly look for new clients.
- Make your clients feel comfortable and popular at the gym, and they will work out more frequently and reach their goals.
- Keep in touch with your clients, even when they're not at the gym. This will help cement relationships.

Interested in more?

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