

## Networking: A Sure-Fire Way to Attract New Clients

*By Daniel Wilson*

Attracting clients is central to any business. Why, then, do many Pilates studios, wellness centers and health clubs suffer from an inconsistent effort in this area?

In conversations I've had with studio owners and club managers, I've learned this can occur when a facility starts off with a cache of existing clients who follow an instructor or owner from a previous position. Having a good number of customers right off the bat lulled them into a false sense of security, and led to a sluggish pursuit of new clients. Then, suddenly, clients move out of the area, or take new jobs that make it hard to attend, or perhaps an instructor leaves and his or her clients follow. Now the studio or club is scrambling to find new faces while taking a hit in revenue.

Fortunately, a bevy of new customers is waiting for your business. Where? Just look outside your studio window. Networking within your local community is a proven way to attract new clients. Here's what some of our customers have done to embed themselves in the community and keep customers coming through the door.

### **Join the Chamber**

First and foremost, join your local Chamber of Commerce. Don't think it won't make a difference – it will. You'll meet business owners and leaders from around the town – many of whom might need your services or know someone who does. Check your Chamber's web site; most hold monthly networking events, and it's an easy first step toward getting your name out there.

### **Meet the People**

Chaos is a Pilates studio located at Canadian BodyWorks Fitness in Brampton, Ontario. Peter Laville and partner Carolyn Austin lease club space and started a Pilates program in May 2004. They learned quickly that in order to grow, they had to pound the pavement. "We grew primarily from word-of-mouth, and community outreach was a huge part of that," says Laville.

The two conducted demos for any external group that was interested. "We did demos or conducted on-site classes for a lot of corporate clients, and many have since joined our studio," says Austin. The pair also conducted demos for martial arts studios, office buildings, and track and rugby clubs.

In a little over a year, the studio went from holding small group sessions with only a few people to classes at full or near capacity. They also saw their private sessions increase in number. Overall, the Pilates program revenue at Chaos more than quintupled during this timeframe. Says Austin, “networking externally was huge, huge, huge for us.”

Martha Williams, PT, runs a flourishing Pilates physical therapy practice and Pilates studio in Vacaville, CA, about 50 miles east of San Francisco. Sport Rehab Physical Therapy has grown from an 800 square foot facility in 1990 to a 6,000 square foot facility largely due to their networking efforts. She charged Jeni Ivovic, her Pilates instructor, with the task of getting new customers in the door for the program. Ivovic aggressively hit the town, meeting with local hair salons, civic groups, school faculties and more, pitching the benefits of Pilates and the idea of taking classes together.

The strategy worked. Since May of 2004, their Pilates program has more than quadrupled. Demand has become so high that Williams has started extra group classes and private sessions and will shortly expand the studio again.

### **Approach Local Groups**

The Perfect Workout in Incline Village, NV, was a personal training center just a few years ago. It has now also become a very successful Pilates center, much of it due to the outreach activities undertaken by owner Debra Fishman. Fishman heavily networked with local doctors and pharmacists, who began referring patients to her. She also handed out flyers to nearby businesses.

Fishman also contacted groups like the local breast cancer survivor awareness group, where she had a Pilates Day with free food and Pilates sessions specifically for them. Some then became clients. The Perfect Workout also contacted the local high school and offered \$5 mat classes for the girls at the school. “They had a great time and many of their moms signed up after hearing how fun it was from their daughters,” says Fishman.

### **Be Charitable**

Stacy Sims of Pendleton Pilates has gone from one Cincinnati-based studio to five. Part of her success definitely involves getting the word out. “No matter where I am – a coffee shop, the grocery store, wherever – I am always ready to talk about Pilates and our studio,” says Sims.

Sims also uses her studio for community outreach. “We donate a lot – like giving out an initial consultation of four free private sessions at various charitable fundraisers around the town. It feels good to be part of a worthy cause and it always ultimately leads to someone coming on as a client.”

“Right now people are looking for Pilates”, adds Sims. “If you put yourself out there and talk to as many folks as possible, people will come. You can save a lot of money on advertising just by being a visible player in the community.”

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