

the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

The Business of Guerilla Fitness

Doug Chapman

When structural steel was created, it ushered in an era of design innovation that transformed skylines around the world. Likewise, the raw material of CrossFit is not only revamping the way we build programs and train athletes, it is also changing the landscape of the fitness business.

Traditional marketing is heavily dependent on advertising and promotions. The glossy ads and catchy slogans promise much and deliver little. They're all sizzle and no steak. They are effective at their intended aim: separating consumers from their money. The conventional commercial gym model is based on renting the same space to as many people as possible, based on the knowledge that many who rent won't actually ever come in and take up any space. The focus of the system is selling memberships, not delivering service—essentially, exploiting clients' weaknesses.

The big-box gym industry targets the 24- to 30-year-old crowd, positioning the gym as a place to meet people—a bar without alcohol, if you like. Big-box gyms make a good deal of money by being a great place to meet people, not necessarily a great place to train, and they tend to be designed and constructed accordingly, frustrating those who are serious about fitness and spurring them to join running clubs, recreation centers, pools and the like. Their hope is to get enough space and be left alone to work out.

CrossFit's revisionist approach to fitness carries over into the business realm, providing an opportunity for affiliates to throw traditional marketing out the door.

Fitness that is timed, measured, and scored is different from the traditional approach, and it can and should be marketed as such. Other fitness offerings play on the same old theme: Lose weight; look great. Everyone claims to deliver elite results. So how can CrossFit affiliates demonstrate the real difference between what we offer and much of the rest of the industry?

Traditional marketing focuses on demographics such as like age, gender, income, education, and location. Within a certain radius of a location, it seems logical to check traffic flows, major employers, and population and then drop a training facility in a likely spot. I can't help but think of a storefront on a major avenue that is dependent on walk-in traffic and visibility to sell its wares. It is everything CrossFit is not.

The line between CrossFit and traditional fitness needs to be glaringly apparent and readily demonstrated. The main reason consumers stop patronizing most businesses is neglect. The traditional gym member does not hear from anyone at the club unless there is a billing issue or it is time to renew. When was the last time a "regular" gym sent you a note asking you why you haven't been in? Or a phone call? If a gym sends out a newsletter, it is full of pleas to "bring a friend to the club," advertisements for supplements, and bad nutritional and training advice. The big box model is all about appearance of fitness and near-total neglect of real, relevant service.

In my opinion, the main thrust of affiliates' "marketing" efforts should be to develop a local community. The efforts should be centered on providing exceptional

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service, information, follow-up, and a sense of belonging that is missing in nearly all other aspects of modern life, and certainly in most of the fitness industry. Keeping in contact with clients help them feel valued, appreciated, like they're part of a team—a fundamental difference between CrossFit and the globo gyms of the world. It also gives you constant feedback on how your clients are doing, how they are responding to your programming, and what their concerns are.

The Internet provides a timely, cost-effective, and high-impact way to keep connected with your existing clients and demonstrate some of what you have to offer to new ones. Unlike direct mail, advertising, going to fitness fairs, and similar outreach methods, the Internet is dependent not on large expenditures of money for small return but on some modest computer savvy, a good database, and the investment of time.

Show me a traditional fitness chain that has a blog. Yeah, I didn't think so. Their websites never show actual people actually working out. All the theoretically great trainers never post what workouts or results. Their websites show fitness models flexing in tight clothing. The underlying impression is if you go to their gyms, you too can be in an ultimate state of flex and you will become popular. Your life will resemble a light beer commercial.

In contrast, scan the blogs of any number of CrossFit affiliates. CrossFit blogs show real people, some frumpy, some stunning, some muscular, some thin, some male, some female, and every race, creed, color, and national origin. All these different types of people are shown putting in max effort, giving 100 percent, and usually smiling. Not fake, airbrushed supermodel smiles, but genuine “thank god that is over” smiles that communicate what really happens after a CrossFit workout. They're smiles that convey a sense of accomplishment.

Accomplishment leads to pride, which leads to that “Hey, you'll never guess what I did today” conversation at the

water cooler. Pictures of these amazing accomplishments on a blog, or videos of workouts on a blog or posted to a site like YouTube, provide a vehicle for these very proud clients to show their family and friends exactly what they did today that seems, on the surface, entirely unbelievable. Imagine the scenario: A happy client sends a link to a video on your blog to ten people in his social network. Now you've got ten possible clients thinking “Hey, I think I could do that too!”

When I first started a [blog](#) for CrossFit AnnArbor in November 2005, I didn't know what to expect. I started posting interesting information, funny pictures, and people working out and having fun doing it. My clients loved it. Before I started blogging, I thought other affiliates who used blogs were too cheap to develop a “good” website. This was another one of those occasions I was wrong. Dead wrong. (It happens more often than I like to admit.)

The personal touch of taking the time to take, edit, and post a photo spoke more to my clients about the sincerity of my concern for them than any other service arrangement. When I took time to post about someone, not only did they see it, everyone else did. And they

told their friends. I didn't know what that was worth until Coach Glassman recommended I read the ClueTrain Manifesto. Having finally learned to listen and act when Coach tells me something, I started reading. It reinforced my view of CrossFit

marketing: that the people who recognize quality will find you. My experience in marketing is that it generally attracts the wrong folks. So, my marketing budget is zero. Doing traditional marketing for a CrossFit affiliate is like using wood construction techniques when you are building with steel. New methods call for new means.

Needless to say, the blog transformed my business. Each evolution, each development is chronicled there. Each good idea, bad idea, and brain fart is there. It is

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Guerilla Fitness (continued...)

weird to write your own history in the moment and then go back and read it. When I look back at a class from 2005, a couple of astonishing things are apparent. First, how many people are still with us. The average gym loses over a third of its membership every year. In order to grow, it needs to replace those people and attract more. The financial demand to bring in new people takes valuable dollars away from service-related activities. At CrossFit, the “right” people stay with it, the others don’t. It’s that simple. I don’t let people sign up until they have taken a class. After that they can join or not. That is basically our whole sales process. I send a follow-up e-mail letting them know where the link is and that they can sign up if they want. It is like crack: First hit is free, then you are either hooked or not.

A second thing that becomes apparent in looking back is how much stronger those same clients are (and look) now. Only a handful of people could do a pull-up before we moved to our new facility. Now we have complete classes that do WODs unmodified. There are few limitations to how I can train my clients.

I said that traditional marketing—like the traditional gym layout—attracts the wrong folks. So, who are the right folks? They are people who are intelligent enough to find something on the Internet and recognize bullshit when they see it. People like you. The training we provide is hard, very hard. The traditional, I-just-want-to-look-good-naked elliptical cardio junkies will not survive. This is okay. I don’t want everyone as a client. The person who has the character to do more, who will go the extra mile and truly wants to be fit is who I want. That is in a nutshell my client base. Look at the pictures. They are 30 to 60 years old, professional, 60 percent women, 40 percent men (roughly) and have tried everything in fitness and then found a home with us.

What we are doing here, all of us, is guerilla fitness—and guerilla business. Changing the way business is traditionally done, exploiting systematic weaknesses and challenging all assumptions are the ways of the guerilla. Within a two-mile radius of my gym are a Bally’s, a Gold’s, an athletic club, a brand-new YMCA, and two county recreation centers, as well as a bevy of training,

Pilates, and yoga studios. Is it too much competition? Absolutely not! (In fact, I link to them all on my blog.) If I had my way, I would put a CrossFit facility in the parking lot of every Bally’s around the country. I believe the average CrossFitter revels in competition and has a strong desire to win and be the best. Why else would we die for points? Globo gym may not know it yet, but the war is on. The more dissatisfied, underappreciated clients globo gym produces, the better our business will be.

The fundamentals of successfully marketing a CrossFit affiliate mirror CrossFit’s fundamental approach to training: Don’t go with the status quo and don’t rely on traditionally accepted strategies. Simply showing what we do will attract attention. By showing those who embrace what we do that we appreciate their support and hard work, that we care about their welfare, and that we consider them part of a training community, we retain clients who are our constant ambassadors. This is better advertising than we could ever afford.



Doug Chapman is the owner of [Hyperfit USA/CrossFit Ann Arbor](#), where he runs a successful “Boot Camp” program that employs best practices from his experience as a Command Fitness Leader for the U.S. Navy. His diverse experience includes membership on the NCAA All-American Wrestling Team in 1987, 1988, and 1989, as well as the United States National Wrestling Team from 1990 to 1996. He has served as wrestling coach at several Michigan universities and for the Department of Defense at the Sigonella Naval Air Station in Sicily, Italy. Chapman holds a bachelor of science degree in finance from Ferris State University and a master of business administration degree from Eastern Michigan University.

Some of the content for this article is adapted from a post on Doug’s [Guerilla Fitness blog](#).