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Hos-pool-tality:

How facility managers can attract and retain clients

Successful management of an aquatic facility requires a manager to step into the shoes of their current and potential clients. Decisions about scheduling, class offerings, passive programs, instructors and concurrent activities should be based on the needs and desires of the community you are serving. The following ideas work effectively to attract new clients and to retain current ones.

Putting out the welcome mat

The welcoming process starts before the client even enters the facility. From a revenue and service perspective you want to open the door to as many people in your community as possible, so active marketing of your programs is crucial. A flier on your facility's bulletin board only reaches the people already coming or someone that a current member might tell.

Brochures and fliers should provide a potential client with enough information to entice them to attend. You need to consider all of the roadblocks that might inhibit their participation. If the flier is too brief, you give them an instant excuse not to attend. They should not have to call the facility for basic information. For example, if your brochure only lists the name of a class and a fee, how would the novice client know whether it would be good for them? The following techniques help remove participation roadblocks:

- Use descriptive terms such as basic, slow paced, dynamic, intermediate or high energy to indicate the difficulty level of the activity
- Refer to class water depth and let potential clients know that flotation equipment is available for deep water classes.
- Inform clients about availability of private changing rooms and secure storage for personal items.
- Entice them with added benefits such as a soak in the spa after class, discounted tickets or passes for frequent users and a telephone number on which an instructor can be contacted regarding any questions.
- Offer one-on-one water orientations to prospective clients.

Opening the door

Offer a variety of classes and times and be sure to include both passive and active programs. You need to serve the needs of clients who enjoy working out in a group setting and those who choose to workout informally with friends or individually.

Active programming

Registered classes

This option is good for specialised classes where it is important to limit the number of participants to provide the proper ratio of clients to instructor. Registered classes guarantee that the class will cover the costs and meet revenue goals. Participants are more consistent and their progress is more synchronised. The downside of registered classes can be the lack of flexibility for the client to attend classes as their personal schedule allows.

Drop-in classes

These allow the participant the greatest flexibility in attending classes when their schedule permits. It encourages participants to attend other classes if personal schedules conflict with their regular class time. It is a 'non-threatening' way for a new client to 'test the water' and try a new activity. Clients feel motivated to bring friends or family members to class, knowing that new clients are always welcome. Drop-in classes are more challenging for aqua instructors as there is a need to be able to introduce moves to new clients while keeping veteran clients motivated.

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Orientations

Orientations are effective for individuals who are curious or unsure about attending a class. I have tried drop-in orientations with varying degrees of success, but in my experience it has been more successful to set orientations up by appointment; this is usually more financially sound as well because the client is more likely to turn up. Often just the initial conversation on the phone with the client can put them at ease and guide them to a class that best suits their needs.

Personal training options

This option is becoming increasingly popular (see Winter issue of *Aqua Fitness Network*). You can offer a free fifteen-minute phone evaluation first, and then the instructor can set up appointments with the client. Group Aqua instructors wanting to work as personal trainers need to gain a Certificate IV in Fitness (SRF40204) qualification. Aqua personal training can be a very successful option for clients with specific goals or for those with special needs such as brain injury or osteoporosis.

Specialty clinics and one-time introductory classes

These can provide a one-time commitment for someone who is curious about a specific format; a water walking clinic, for example, would provide 'coaching' to individuals who like to work out on their own.

Passive programming

Increasing participation at facilities during quieter times of the day is an ongoing challenge for most facility managers, and something which could be partially addressed by advertising the times available for clients to exercise on their own. These are passive programs, without instructors or set workouts for clients. The education process for these clients can be passive. For example, have basic, safe-to-use equipment available, provide instructions on how to use it, and provide sample workouts. Set up and advertise one or two lap lanes for water exercisers and invite them into your facility just as you do the lap swimmers.

There are peak times that are good for a number of different clients due to work and school schedules and day versus night use. In a multi-pool facility, you might have swim lessons in a shallow water pool, a swim team in the lap lanes and a deep water class in the diving well all at the same time. How will these groups interact? Will the participants in each activity have a quality experience? When multi-programming a facility the following factors need consideration:

- What is the noise level?
- Will there be room for all participants in the changing room?
- What is the parking availability?
- How can the beginning and the end of each activity be timed so everyone can enjoy the spa?

Grooming your ambassadors

It is important that the entire staff is engaged in the goal of having a successful aqua fitness program. This includes reception, maintenance, lifeguards, aqua instructors and management.

Your key greeter: The receptionist

The receptionist is the first and last contact for clients, whether on the phone or at the front desk. This person should be educated about the program offerings, sensitive to the issues that may concern a new client and welcoming and encouraging to prospective and returning clients. It is useful for receptionists to take classes themselves, or at least observe the classes occasionally, so that they can sell the 'product' effectively.

The gateway to the pool

A swimming pool is a unique facility in which clients are invited into the 'bathroom' before they enter the 'living room'. The maintenance crew's attention to cleanliness is an integral part of the success of the program. If the facility is clean, bright and smells good, the clients will return. If they do not feel comfortable in the dressing rooms, they may never come back to the pool, even if they enjoy the classes.

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Hosts at the poolside

The lifeguards are the poolside ambassadors and should take water exercise classes to see how buoyancy and resistance equipment functions on the body, and to understand that the aqua instructor is involved in teaching, not life-guarding. Sensitivity training is sometimes necessary to be sure that no verbal or non-verbal expressions are made by staff to each other that would make larger clients feel uncomfortable or unwelcome.

At the helm

Facility managers need to be savvy to the needs of adults in the facility. Be aware of the need to offset the time that older adults and small children are in the dressing room. Managers should acknowledge that fitness programming is not transient; it takes a minimum of six weeks for an individual to make the change in their lifestyle for a fitness pursuit. Clients do not respond well to last minute schedule changes or program changes on a quarterly basis. If you want to make time changes it is important that you survey your classes and let them be part of the process. You may assume, for example, that participants would prefer a 9am class, but then find out that more of them support a 7:30am timeslot.

Ambassadors of client retention

Dedicated water fitness instructors are treasures to a facility. Since most aquatic facilities are staffed by part time employees the aqua instructors usually 'pop in and out' of the facility to teach classes throughout the week. It is important that the manager provides opportunities for instructors to get together to train and discuss issues. Encourage instructors to take each other's classes. Incorporating the water fitness staff with the lifeguard staff in safety training can build a team environment that will pay off if an emergency occurs. Providing the opportunity for continuing education is an investment in keeping classes up to date and keeping instructors motivated and creative. An instructor's enthusiasm directly contributes to retaining clients in your facility.

Providing added incentives

Try introducing fitness challenges that involve virtual trips over a six to eight-week period of time. These trips can be to any destination in the world; try 'swimming' with the humpback whales on their annual migration from Antarctica to the breeding grounds of northern Australia for example. Clients sign up for free (though still paying their regular fees) and are credited for each daily workout. A pre-determined number of workouts take them to the destination points in the journey, and a prize draw can reward regular attendees. Over the six-week time frame they report in to the receptionists who can encourage clients to keep on the journey and congratulate them along the way. This also allows the receptionists to learn the participants' names and opens the door for conversation and recognition.

Final results: What's it all about

When clients share their delight in their fat-loss, their reduced need for medication, or their general improved health and wellbeing because they have gained so much from their water fitness workouts, the efforts by every member of staff can be seen to be paying off. This is what it is all about; water fitness can be life changing for clients. Make your aqua facility a welcoming and nurturing setting for health and wellness to flourish. ♦



Christine Crutcher

Christine Crutcher is an aquatics supervisor in Oregon, USA. She is site manager for an indoor water park and manages the water fitness program for two multi-pool facilities. She recently assisted with the development of the AEA's Deep Water Fitness Certification and manual. Christine serves on the AEA Advisory Board, is an AEA certified instructor and has been sharing the joys of water fitness for twenty-seven years.

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