

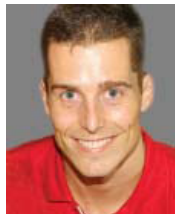
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## HOW TO BUILD A CLIENT BASE FAST

By Andrew Simmons

Provided as part of your Professional Network membership

## About the Author



### **Andrew Simmons, BSpSc**

A sought-after presenter and lecturer at lifestyle and fitness conventions both nationally and internationally, Andrew is the director of Vision Personal Training, Australia's fastest growing personal training studio franchise with 31 studios throughout NSW and Queensland. Vision is the winner of the 2008 Franchise Council of Australia's Emerging Franchise System of the Year Award.

Andrew was voted Personal Trainer of the Year in 2003, and he is also author of *Fat Loss Take Control*, which has sold in excess of 35,000 copies. Andrew's main passion is to help decrease the escalating diabetes and obesity epidemic currently seen throughout Australia. To do this, he and his support team focus their energies exclusively on the development of personal training studios. With the goal of opening 110 studios throughout Australia by 2012, Andrew believes that he is able to make a significant contribution to the health issues faced by everyday Australians.

Vision Personal Training opened its first studio in Sydney, NSW in February 2001 in response to the evident need to provide people with a small, friendly training environment, where personal attention comes first. Vision's concept represents the next step in the evolution of the fitness industry, providing a product that delivers a truly comprehensive approach to weight loss, health and fitness that is sustainable long term.

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# HOW TO BUILD A CLIENT BASE FAST

**T**he opportunity to build a successful personal training business has never been so strong. With obesity and diabetes rates growing to epidemic levels, seeking the services of a personal trainer has shifted from being a luxury to a necessity in the eyes of many members of the public. Consequently, the number of people seeking a career in personal training has skyrocketed. At the same time, however, we have witnessed the average career lifespan of a personal trainer falling from approximately two years to less than one year. This statistic is not only alarming, but also frustrating, as there are far more people who need the services of a personal trainer than there are personal trainers graduating from Certificate IV in Fitness courses.

Rather than highlight the causes of the declining professional lifespan of personal trainers, it is more appropriate and beneficial to be positive and focus on how to build a client base – the key to a satisfying, successful and long-term fitness career. In order to achieve this, you must:

1. Believe in the benefits of your service
2. Deliver great results
3. Focus on the horse instead of the cart
4. Create multiple referral systems
5. Create partnerships.

## Step 1. Believe in the benefits of your service

### Use a trainer yourself!

Many people become personal trainers without ever experiencing the benefits of a trainer themselves. To maintain the quality of your service, it is essential that you use the services of a personal trainer. How can you sell something from the heart if you have never used or experienced the product or service yourself? The most successful salespeople are those who truly believe in what they are selling.

Having been a PT for more than 15 years, I am fully aware that I achieve far better results when I use a trainer myself than when I train alone. Consequently, not only do I become a better role model for my clients through the results that I achieve, I acquire new skills from my trainer and am able to apply them when training my clients, team of trainers and franchise owners. Experiencing the pain of handing over hard earned cash to my trainer for his service and expecting a great session, I too am reminded of the high expectations that my clients have of me when they, in turn, hand over their money to me. As a result, I provide a much better service when I am training them.

### PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH

When was the last time you used the services of a PT? Make it your aim to be a personal training *client* at least once a month

New PTs are often attracted to the industry by what they see as the opportunity to be their own boss, especially if they have been an employee for a considerable period of time. This perception, however, can be misguided. Although personal trainers are able to choose the hours they work, what they do and who they train, trainers should view their clients as being the boss in the relationship; after all, they are the ones who hire and fire us.

In my early days as a PT, if a client ever told me that they wanted to stop training, and gave reasons such as 'I can't afford it' or 'I'm too busy', I made the mistake of believing them and thinking that it had nothing to do with the service I provided. In the intervening years, I have witnessed many clients who train with our trainers make the same excuses. During our extensive exit interview process, I have subsequently found these 'reasons' to not actually be true – rather it was due to what they perceived to be the substandard service being provided. The truth was that the trainers were being sacked by their clients. A trainer's level of acceptance of such excuses will determine their level of success. Since I adopted a 'zero acceptance' policy towards such excuses, we have not only been able to understand the real reasons for clients wishing to cease training, but to also improve our retention and new sales due to the improved service that we provide, based on the feedback provided by clients.

### FIND REASONS, NOT EXCUSES

Adopt a zero acceptance policy towards excuses. Compile a list of questions to ask clients who inform you of their intention to cease using your services. The aim is to get to the real *reason* for leaving, not an *excuse*. Once you understand the reason, you will understand how to approach the situation.

### Live the dream

Many people become personal trainers without ever having experienced any form of health or fitness-related success themselves, making it harder to be good role models for their clients. In the early days of the fitness industry, a personal trainer was usually an elite athlete, competitive body builder or body shaper who was reaching the end of their career and wished to help other individuals in their respective field achieve similar success. Those trainers were role models who lived by the motto 'Who you are and what you do should be the same thing'. As a result, the trainers inspired their clients to achieve great results which in turn led them to building successful personal training businesses due to the amount of referral business they attracted. These trainers paved the way for other role models to believe that it was possible to have a successful career in personal training.

Through my contact with thousands of trainers over the years, I have found that generally it is those trainers who

continue to live by the motto 'Who you are and what you do should be the same thing' who grow and maintain successful businesses. Those who don't live by the motto and adopt the 'do as I say, not as I do' philosophy usually fail. In recent times particularly, I have noticed many trainers entering the industry still trying to embrace and understand what they want, who they are as individuals and what it takes to achieve great results. You cannot truly give to other people until you are in control of your own health and fitness, and your life in general.

### WHO YOU ARE AND WHAT YOU DO SHOULD BE THE SAME THING

Even if you have achieved impressive fitness-related goals in the past, set yourself a new SMART personal fitness goal, and stick to it, be it strength, cardio, speed or agility-related. Undergoing the process of setting, striving towards and achieving the goal will provide you with fresh, relevant and personal experience with which to inspire your clients.

### Expand your market

Your ability to build and maintain a client base will also be determined by your belief in the following:

1. Who needs a personal trainer
2. How long someone needs a personal trainer; and
3. Why someone needs a personal trainer.

In my view, everyone would benefit greatly from the services of a personal trainer, regardless of fitness ability. Tiger Woods, Roger Federer and Usain Bolt, all leaders in their sports, have coaches and trainers, as do leading international bodybuilders and bodyshapers. If you continue to effectively set goals for your clients and give them what they want, you can keep your clients for your entire personal training career. Once clients understand how to achieve great results, they continue to use the services of a trainer mainly for reasons of accountability.

As a result of these beliefs, my acceptance of clients making excuses for not training is very low. It also means that my market has widened dramatically, which gives me a greater ability to build a client base faster in any areas in which we choose to open studios.

## Step 2. Deliver great results

### Results equal referrals

Helping clients achieve mind-blowing results is at the heart of building a client base fast.

Results = retention and referrals. Many people believe that my PT business somehow has an innate ability to grow faster than their business and say things like 'but your business is different, you have studios everywhere and have heaps of group marketing money to spend'. Our first studio located in Caringbah in the south of Sydney grew to over 500 weekly hours of personal training within 18 months due simply to the huge amount of referral business we gained as a consequence of achieving amazing results. Our clients became 'advocates' for our business, walking billboards so to speak. As a result of their massive physical transformations, they would be stopped

by their friends and asked what they had been doing to achieve such noticeable results, opening the gateway for the client to tell them about our service. Not having to rely on people spreading the word about your business *consciously* is a great way to build a business fast.

Similarly, to grow a franchise network of over 30 studios, we have spent less than \$5,000 on franchise-related advertising. We have grown due to the referrals generated as a result of the success of each franchise. While we have a growing marketing fund to access, to open new studios and to attract new clients to those studios, we will continue to use referrals as our main growth strategy. And this philosophy can be used no matter how big your business is.

### CHART PROGRESS

Put yourself in your client's position. If you were them, would you be pleased with the progress achieved by your training, or are the results negligible? Consider whether progress is expected to be slow to start with, in which case reassure the client of why this is and explain the timescale of progress you envision, or whether you need to amend the program you have designed for them.

### Accountability is the key

In recent times, many leading personal trainers have identified that applying coaching principles is essential to gaining results for their clients. In brief, coaching involves the client being at the centre of the decision-making process and requires trainers to ask questions rather than tell clients what to do. Through an understanding of coaching, leading personal trainers understand that they cannot motivate anyone to achieve their goals, they can only educate, coach and inspire clients to become self motivated. The most powerful way to help your clients achieve outstanding results is to inspire them through your personal actions. As detailed in Step 1, using the services of a PT yourself is a great way to achieve this.

### HAND YOUR CLIENTS THE POWER OF SELF-MOTIVATION

Read books and attend seminars, convention sessions or workshops on coaching. Developing skills in this area will enable you to hand clients control of their exercise and diet. The self-motivation this promotes is a great way to achieve results, and is also a powerful referral and retention tool.

In order to become motivated to achieve their goals, many people need social proof or evidence that it can be done by people in similar situations to them. Unfortunately, regardless of the amount of hard training you do and discipline you exercise in relation to food, many people believe that trainers are 'lucky' and just naturally skinny, lean or fit. This can result in clients not feeling that their trainer understands their situation. Having experienced this first hand, I found that the best way to inspire individuals who hold these beliefs is to share the stories of what you have achieved with clients who have been in similar situations. For example, before I had kids, one of my clients said to me 'You wouldn't know hard it is to exercise and

eat well; with two kids it is impossible'. My response to that statement was 'Well, I train a lady who has three kids under five and she manages to walk in the evenings once the kids go to bed. She also ensures that she prepares healthy snacks for the family before she goes to bed, so she doesn't snack on junk the next day'. I then showed her the 'before' and 'after' photo of the results that the client had achieved (with permission of course) and then introduced her to the client when she was next in the studio.

Since then, rather than make excuses, she made the decision to take responsibility for her health. In effect, the client who had achieved great results inspired my client who wasn't achieving great results to become self motivated to achieve her goals. Sharing stories like these is critical in creating new positive belief systems, which ultimately play a large role in determining human behaviour.

### CREATE YOUR OWN CASE STUDIES

Clients respond positively to real case studies of people who have been in a similar situation to themselves. Seek permission from previous, or ongoing, clients to use their success stories as motivational tools, using before, during and 'after' photos, along with some personal information (e.g., '36-year-old mother of two, works full time, 84kg, diagnosed type II diabetes' etc), sample exercise plans and weekly menus.

Similarly, before my business grew, my busy corporate clients would also make excuses for not eating and exercising well, and say things to me like *'just wait 'til you have a lot of staff, overheads and business lunches to go to. Then you'll understand how hard it is to stay in shape'*. Unfortunately, no matter what I said about my experiences, I never seemed to be able to effectively establish commonality. Now that I am in a similar situation to them and continue to exercise regularly and eat well, they no longer use such excuses and are now achieving their goals. Without role modelling, their belief that it was possible would not have been there.

Through leading by example, trainers have the ability to empathise with their clients and are better equipped to provide solutions when clients struggle with motivation, struggle to eat well when they are tired, stressed, bored or busy. A trainer who has experienced all of these emotions and situations will be far more likely to address such scenarios and to disallow clients to justify their lack of discipline.

### It's not all about exercise!

Many personal trainers simply focus on training people. That is, they take their clients through a series of exercises, chat to them about life in between sets, stretch them at the end and send them on their merry way. Helping clients achieve their goals requires more mental exercise than physical exercise. For example, helping someone to adhere to their exercise and eating plan when they are not with their trainer is far more important in their bid to achieve fat loss than simply pushing them hard during their session. For our weight loss clients, we focus on emotions, education, eating and exercise – in that order of priority. Once you understand the reasons for their actions or inactions (their

emotions) you can effectively educate them about their eating and their exercise. Without the understanding of what drives your clients to do what they do when they are not with you, the exercises you prescribe them and how hard you push them when they are with you becomes insignificant.

Attempting to truly understand what motivates your clients during an exercise session, when they are struggling to breathe, is extremely difficult. Therefore, an essential part of your service should include regular structured consultation type sessions that do not involve exercise. At Vision, our first session is held over two hours in a private room and involves mainly goal setting and program planning. As we believe that what you eat is more important than the exercise you do when it comes to losing weight and building muscle, we also perform up to five specific nutrition sessions with each client, and provide free educational seminars on eating and exercise as well as shopping tours, all as part of our services. Goal planning sessions every nine weeks that do *not* involve exercise also ensure that clients are held accountable to their goals. The explosion in the world of business coaching highlights the importance of, and need for, goal setting and accountability.

### TALK, THINK AND PLAN

Schedule regular structured consultation sessions with your clients that do not involve exercise. These should focus on goal setting, program planning and nutrition. Allocating dedicated time reinforces the importance of these issues and provides the incentive for clients to continue their daily program when they are not in sessions with you.

## Step 3. Focus on the horse instead of the cart

In order for a cart to move effectively, it requires a horse to pull it along. In terms of a personal trainer's required skills, their technical skills are placed in the cart and their business skills 'in' the horse:

| The Horse – Business skills                                                                                                             | The Cart – Technical skills                                                                                                                       |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sales</li> <li>• Marketing</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Personal development</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anatomy</li> <li>• Physiology</li> <li>• Programming</li> <li>• Exercise</li> <li>• Nutrition</li> </ul> |

Without possessing the above 'horse' or business skills, it does not really matter how technically gifted or smart a trainer is, as they will not have any clients to train.

Many years ago, after studying an exercise science degree I believed that it was more important for me to focus on the technical aspects of personal training. While my knowledge grew markedly, I did not understand why other trainers who were less technically gifted had more successful businesses than me. I would attend workshops on the latest exercises, progressions and program techniques, as well as seminars on the latest findings in nutrition research, but still my client base failed to grow as I wanted it to. After reading *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* by Robert Kiyosaki, I realised that I was not on the

right track to personal training business success. My ‘cart’ was overflowing, but my ‘horse’ was dozing. I then changed tracks and focused on those things in the ‘horse’ outlined above and attended seminars on sales, communication, personal motivation and development. In particular, my session selections at the FILEX fitness industry convention changed significantly. I moved from attending almost 100 per cent technical sessions, to approximately 50 per cent of each. Nowadays, I attend mainly business sessions, as I believe I have reached the stage where my development in that area will bring me far greater success. This shift in focus not only helped me to attract more clients, but helped them achieve better results, as I learned how to help them commit to their goals.

For many people, old habits die hard. That is, many people who have not led a healthy lifestyle for many years struggle to maintain their enthusiasm long-term, even though they know that they should remain focused. Consequently, they stop training if given the opportunity to do so. For many years, our business only sold ‘Pay as you go’ personal training sessions, which allowed clients to simply pay for each session upon arrival. Not only did that business model lead to substantial losses due to clients not paying for sessions, it gave them an easy opportunity not to exercise, should they fall back to their old habits. As a result, I struggled to grow my business.

After attending a sales workshop conducted by Steve Jensen at FILEX a few years ago, I realised that this business model was not helping my business grow, nor was it helping my clients achieve great results. During that, and many following sessions, I learned how to effectively sell 6 and 12-month personal training programs. This new skill not only guaranteed weekly sessions, it also ensured that clients were compliant to their training. Knowing that they would have to pay for the sessions if they did not attend often led to clients turning up and training, when in the past they may well have skipped a session if they weren’t ‘in the mood’. As a result, they achieved better results, which led to happier clients and greater opportunities for referrals. Many clients have actually thanked us for making them commit to a long-term program, as they understand that if it was not for the financial commitment and the constant encouragement from their trainers to do the sessions, they would have stopped training long ago.

Ironically, many personal trainers wish to start their own training businesses without possessing any business skills. They simply rely on their technical skills as trainers to get them by and wonder why they cannot build successful businesses even though they are technically very gifted. Therefore, graduates from Certificate IV in Fitness courses – which tend to predominantly focus on the technical aspects of personal training – and even experienced technical trainers, should also learn to focus on the ‘horse’.

CREATE A POWERFUL HORSE

Read books and attend seminars, convention sessions or workshops on business skills, which include the areas of sales, marketing, communication and personal development.

INVALUABLE WORDS OF WISDOM

The following list of books was recommended to me by my business coach, and many of them have been integral to my professional development and subsequent business success.

- *Now, Discover Your Strengths* by Marcus Buckingham & Donald O. Clifton, Ph.D
- *Focal Point* by Brian Tracy
- *Eat that Frog* by Brian Tracy
- *The Ultimate Sales Letter* by Dan Kennedy
- *The Ultimate Marketing Plan* by Dan Kennedy
- *No B.S. Sales Success* by Dan Kennedy
- *The Success Principles* by Jack Canfield
- *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen Covey
- *The 8th Habit* by Stephen Covey
- *The Sales Bible* by Jeffrey Gitomer
- *The E Myth* by Michael Gerber
- *E Myth Mastery* by Michael Gerber
- *Developing the Leader within You* by John Maxwell
- *Cashflow Quadrant* by Robert Kiyosaki
- *The One Minute Millionaire* by Mark Victor Hansen
- *Fish* by Stephen Lundin, Harry Paul & John Christensen
- *Fish for Life* by Stephen Lundin, Harry Paul & John Christensen
- *Getting Everything you Can out of All You’ve Got* by Jay Abraham
- *Winning* by Jack Welch
- *Jack Welch on Leadership* by Robert Slater
- *Blue Ocean Strategy* by W. Chan Kim & Renee Mauborgne
- *Awaken the Giant Within* by Anthony Robbins
- *Guerrilla Marketing in 30 Days* by Jay Conrad Levinson & Al Lautenslager
- *First Break All the Rules* by Marcus Buckingham
- *Purple Cow* by Seth Godin
- *Execution by The Discipline of Getting things Done* by Larry Bossidy & Ram Charan
- *Influence Science and Practice* by Robert B Cialdini

Step 4. Create multiple referral systems

As outlined in Step 2, relying on your clients to talk about your services when asked can be highly effective. However, your business growth can be markedly accelerated by developing a range of referral systems. Unfortunately, many personal trainers do not feel comfortable asking their clients for referrals – and by failing to do so, they do their clients a disservice.

Leadership gurus suggest that we are a product of the five people that we spend most of our time with (i.e., our ‘circle of influence’). As most clients spend only up to a few hours each week with their personal trainer, the ‘five people’ theory would suggest that their close family, friends and/or work colleagues will have a big influence on their results. It is important, therefore, for those people to understand and support what your client is trying to achieve. The best way to do this is to get

them involved with you. The following are some simple ways/times to ask for referrals.

### At point of sale

The most appropriate time to ask for referrals is as close to the point of sale as possible. When your client starts with you they are excited about making life changes. If you explain the impact that their 'circle of influence' has on their ability to achieve their goals and back the concept up with examples of how it has affected other people, you will create a great opportunity for success.

### During regular 'goal' or assessment sessions

Clients often feel quite emotionally changed when they achieve their goals and become extremely grateful for what you have done for them. At this time, it is appropriate to simply let them know that you are looking to build your client base and would greatly appreciate their assistance in helping you to do so. This method can be very successful, as long as the client achieves their goals.

### During information seminars

Offering free information and educational seminars is a great way to not only reinforce what clients should be doing to reach their goals, but to also provide a risk-free opportunity for your client's friends and family to experience your business.

### During partner sessions

Exercising in a fitness facility is very daunting for many people, especially if they are out of shape. Allowing your client's friends to do a free session with them is a great way to reduce the feeling of uncertainty or intimidation. If you are a trainer in a gym, let the manager or owner know that they could get another gym member by allowing you to do this.

### During group training sessions

Similar to partner sessions, the group training environment also reduces the barriers to training for the friends of your clients. At Vision, our group training sessions are generally exclusive to our personal training clients. Therefore we only allow the friends of our clients to attend one group training session before being required to become a client.

When implementing each of these referral systems, it is important to ensure that both the client and the referred client are provided incentives. For many years, I provided free sessions as incentives for clients to refer their friends. However, what I failed to realise was that while clients sought my services to achieve their goals, many of them really did not like what it takes to achieve their goals i.e., exercise. Therefore, my incentive of extra sessions really did not appeal to them. Since creating a list of incentives for clients to choose from, we have seen the number of referrals increase markedly. Your list could include:

- 5 free sessions
- An iPod
- Gold Class movie tickets
- A massage
- A good bottle of wine
- A weekend away.



## TAKE THE REFERRAL OPPORTUNITY

Make a point of asking clients for referrals during these times;

- At point of sale
- During regular 'goal' or assessment sessions
- During information seminars
- During partner sessions
- During group training sessions.

## Step 5. Create partnerships

Creating partnerships with companies that share similar demographics and services is an extremely effective way of building your client base. While this idea in itself is not new, it is important to note that such partnerships are ineffective unless the key people in the affiliated businesses have an emotional connection to your business. You need to have a strong relationship with them, they need to have a great understanding of your business and they must want to passionately support your business. The best way to ensure this is through training them and helping them achieve great results. They too will then become advocates for your business.

Further, by sending your clients to their businesses, they will be more inclined to reciprocate. Allied professionals such as doctors, physiotherapists and chiropractors are fantastic sources of referral business. Unfortunately, however, many of these practitioners do not treat the fitness industry seriously, citing a general lack of formal training for their scepticism about what we do. By presenting yourself professionally and effectively showing them what we are capable of doing for them and their patients, they can provide a regular stream of clients.

## PRESENT YOURSELF PROFESSIONALLY

Present yourself professionally to potential partners. Ensure you have a smart uniform and appearance, clearly designed and literate materials explaining your services and benefits, and a confident, well-researched presentation to 'sell' yourself.

Building an amazingly successful personal training business is not difficult. All that it takes is a genuine passion for what you do and the people you train, some sound business principles and a 'never say die' attitude. By combining these, you can quickly build your client base, grow your business and improve the health of Australia. ■

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