

# the art of selling pilates

you know the benefits of the method. but explaining them to clients can be harder than doing star on the chair. so i asked other studio owners to share their secrets to selling clients on pilates. the answers were a revelation

BY MARIA LEONE

A few months ago I was observing one of the newer teachers in my Beverly Hills studio, Bodyline, as she worked with a first-time client. The instructor was very engaged, describing all the intricacies of the footwork on the Reformer. The client barely performed a repetition without a correction on form. Fifteen minutes into the session, they were still doing footwork. This client had come to us because she wanted to get her pre-pregnancy body back. The big sell for her was abdominal work, and she knew Pilates was a perfect fit for her goals. Yet spending so much of her session on foot alignment was not going to get her hooked on her teacher, our studio or Pilates. I thought this should have been obvious, but it wasn't. Because she got so wrapped up in her teaching, the instructor failed to deliver what the client came to Bodyline for in the first place. It was a lesson for me: Great teachers still need to be taught how to be salespeople.

Luring clients in the door is one of

the most difficult—and expensive—parts of running a Pilates studio. Over the years it has been so frustrating to me to see time and money squandered when the client does only one or two sessions and then disappears or, worse,

quits Pilates altogether because she didn't feel it enough. Teachers need to focus on how to make sessions memorable and specific to the desires of their clients. All great teachers, whether they want to admit it or not



Rule 1: Don't oversell

(because *selling* is sort of a dirty word for us), know how to get their clients hooked. Do you?

## only one first impression

"The first thing I do when clients walk in the door is make them feel comfortable and safe," says Laurie Walker, owner of PRO'Active Pilates Studio in Westlake Village, CA. "I am very friendly, down-to-earth, dressed professionally and energetic. Once they trust my intentions, they open up a bit more and tell me about their goals, and we discuss how realistic they are. Overselling, exaggerating and generalizing are all no-nos; my sales tools are honest information, friendly ambience, and passionate, experienced instructors." Walker then invites clients to tour the studio and, if they have time, to watch a session.

Kyria Sabin, founder and director of Body Works Studio in Phoenix, takes a similar approach with new clients. "We focus our in-person meeting on getting to know about them and their goals," she says. "We don't overwhelm them with information and package options. To the degree possible, we tailor our response to their needs, goals, schedule and financial considerations." Sabin, who's also director of the Ron Fletcher Company and its teacher training program as well as a faculty member at the University of Arizona, agrees that a first-time studio tour is important. "It helps new clients to get a feel for Body Works."

## your experience, their goals

Knowing a client's goals is a key part of the sales process. As Mari Winsor, owner of two studios in Los Angeles, puts it, "One really important thing when you're teaching is to tune in to the body that's in front of you. For the client who is used to weight training,

I spend extra time teaching them to support their extremities with their powerhouse. With a client who just wants to talk, I redirect the conversation back to the workout and reiterate how Pilates can clear the mind. You can't do the same thing for everyone."

As Winsor points out, clients initially seek out Pilates for a host of reasons, and each will require a different approach to secure them as part of your clientele. At Bodyline, potential new clients often come in because of a spe-

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cial event—a red carpet event or Bar Mitzvah—and many brides-to-be come so their arms will look strong carrying their bouquet. In these cases, we would bias the session toward performing more plank-like positions and full-body exercises with heavier springs. The session must have more of a workout feel and a nonstop flow.

Other clients come to strengthen a bad back or improve posture. These sessions can move more slowly and incorporate more balance and breath work. These clients will come back because they realize how much better

they would feel now if they'd started Pilates earlier. Most of our male clients come to enhance their skills at a sport or to increase flexibility. So for a golfer, we may emphasize rotation exercises to strengthen the rotators of the trunk. With cyclists, we choose moves that will keep the back extensors strong and the anterior shoulder and chest areas flexible.

While big-picture goals are discussed at the initial session, we need to remind clients that they're achieving smaller milestones at every session. For Laurie Walker's clients, "Every time is about reaching goals, drawing from their last session and looking forward to the next one," she says. "Each one includes accomplishment, progression and challenge."

## making real connections

Beyond individual goals, you should differentiate the client's experience at your studio from what they would get at the typical large gym, because that intimate boutique feel and very high level of customer service is what separates the independent Pilates studio from the health club. (Note: You need to acknowledge the growing trend of gyms installing small Pilates studios manned by well-trained staff.) To set yourself apart—and this may seem obvious—address clients by their names. After you read over their personal history on their intake form, refer to any specifics on it frequently during the session. For example, if someone has a heel spur, I'll explain how a certain exercise can be beneficial and later check back to make sure he or she isn't experiencing discomfort.

Though "hands-on" policies vary, I integrate manual cueing with clients during the first workout. I find it helps me connect quickly to clients and deepens their physical sensation of the workout. Place your hands on

## PERFECT PITCH

Even experienced salespeople make rookie mistakes, says Keith Rosen, executive sales coach, CEO of ProfitBuilders.com and author of *Coaching Salespeople into Sales Champions* (John Wiley, 2008). And since most Pilates pros are not trained in sales, their selling process is often based on intuition and personality rather than tried-and-true technique. "Mention 'selling' to creative people, and they tend to shut down," says Rosen. "Unfortunately, this resistance often leads to small-business failure. In reality, selling is all about delivering value. This definition lets you leverage your talents in a more profound way so you can do what you love most—make a positive impact on someone's life. So instead of saying, 'I don't sell,' embrace salesmanship in a way that honors your integrity and style." Rosen's five rules of perfect sales pitching can help get you started.

**Establish value.** "Explain what you can do for people by uncovering what value looks like through *their* eyes, not yours. This doesn't mean doing a data dump or telling people Pilates is the greatest thing in the world. This approach turns off clients because you're focusing on what *you* think is important rather than what they do."

**Figure out what clients want.** The information you share is determined by a client's expectations. To find out what those are, ask questions like "Why are you here today? How much do you know about Pilates already?"

**Keep asking questions.** Often people's motivations are several layers deep. Maybe the overweight guy didn't come in to drop pounds but to work on his golf swing. Perhaps the thin young woman with a dancer's body can't touch her toes. Closing is a natural by-product of asking the right questions. If the sales process is done well, the client will close herself.

**Stay focused on client goals.** Have your staff continually ask clients for feedback to ensure that you're meeting their expectations: "Did we achieve what you wanted today? What can we work on more or less?"

**Generate word of mouth.** When it comes to asking clients to make referrals, the best time is after you have delivered some real value (e.g., given a great session). Then you can ask them, "If you like what I'm doing for you, would you be open to sharing your experience with others?" You can also create a referral system, where you write to customers, possibly offering them an incentive as a way of saying thank you while motivating them to share their experience with others. Keep in touch through snail mail or email to consistently reinforce your message. —A.M.O.

the area of their backs you'd like them to straighten. Ask them to pull their abdominals away from your finger as you point toward their navel. But before you ever touch a new client, ask if it's okay if you use your hands to guide him or her.

## explanation of benefits

From a client's initial contact throughout their entire time with you, be sure to reiterate the benefits of Pilates. In addition to explaining how they relate to the client's individual goals, mention these other very marketable points: core strengthening (anything that tones the abs sells); improving posture (how the client will appear taller and thinner); strengthening and stretching at the same time (double the results in half the time); and of course—that perennial perk—stress reduction (Pilates breathing has been shown to lower stress levels).

"I also feel that, as instructors, we have to spend more time selling the true benefits of the work by getting the client to focus internally," says Chelsea B. Jones, president of Evolve/Body Balance Movement Therapy in Raleigh, NC. "Some of these are physical," she notes, ticking off a list that includes "uniform space and articulation within the spine, supple rib cage and sternum from correct breathing, uniform strength and flexibility in the body, understanding correct biomechanics, increased bone density, relief from low back pain, increased vital energy, vigor and durability to pursue daily tasks and play. Some of the mental/spiritual benefits include a humble respect for your and others' body, including its limitations and possibilities, change in vision of what a beautiful body looks and feel like, self-confidence through mastery of exercises, rather than appearance."

Kyria Sabin adds, "We commonly find that our clients apply the approach they learn in Pilates to other areas of their life. For example, it has helped one of our attorney clients litigate with more physical power and greater confidence. Another client—a respected surgeon—reports that he no longer experiences neck and shoulder pain and fatigue during surgery. Many report that the grace and ease with which they get through their

day is enhanced by the work they do at Body Works."

## sticker shock

One of the major roadblocks we Pilates pros face in "closing the deal" is justifying the cost of sessions. "The 'value-seeker' group can be difficult to work with when the client is in need of private sessions," says Chelsea Jones. "I've also found that some value-seeking clients tend to pay less attention because they are paying less money. When these clients don't feel the benefits of Pilates, they lose interest. After all, without focus and control, it's not Pilates.

"Like many studios, our organization offers group classes specifically for beginner clients, after completion of a primary evaluation," she continues. "Working through the system in a group setting is cost-effective, but that's best suited for clients with no body 'issues' and a high degree of focus."

Part of any cost discussion should be a subtle explanation of the difference between the intimate studio experience and that at other venues, whether it's a health club or a franchise that allows students to take as many apparatus classes as they want. I have found that it's hard to compete with that perception of a higher value, even to a highly educated client. I counter that by making sure my studio has a boutique-y feeling and that clients realize they're getting a better product and a higher level of customer service, both through personalization, a highly experienced and educated staff, and by the décor and feel of the studio, which is clean, modern, naturally light and fresh-smelling. The message we are sending is, This is a place for people who are interested in wellness.

Make sure that if your session is going to include matwork, you sneak it in on the carriage of the Reformer or on the Cadillac. Since most gyms now offer free mat classes to members,

many of your consumers may not value it. I find that when booking first-time clients, they often want to confirm that their session will be on the equipment. You know how challenging matwork is and what your role is in helping clients master the moves, but ironically, new clients may balk at paying full price for "just matwork."

## always follow up

Even if a client has already booked their next session, I send an email ask-

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ing them how their body felt the next day. There is no substitute for keeping in "constant contact" with your clients. You may not think it is part of your job, but it is. This is how you build a clientele that will remain loyal to you—even when someone else comes along and offers them a sweeter deal.

Old-fashioned etiquette goes a long way. Two or three days after meeting with a client for the first time, says Laurie Walker, "I will send them an informal thank-you via e-mail, or a personal note, or, if I have their address, a thank-you card." She also calls them when they get back from vacation and

checks in with them when they are sick.

On the flip side, the single biggest mistake teachers can make, Mari Winsor says, is too much focus on the technical. "Those clients will never come back!" she says, drawing on her years of personal experience. "I don't care about the history of Pilates or the specifics of the Hundred. I want to move! It's the rare person who will want to know the names of all the muscles. Just point or put three fingers on the part of the body you want them to feel. That's better than a 10-minute dissertation. It's not about you and how much knowledge you have; it's about making the person feel good. Save the mishigas for teacher-training workshops!"

## end on a positive note

Sometimes we are so focused on "correcting" our clients that we can make them feel like they will never be good at Pilates. This is counterproductive. "Joe always knew what exercises a client could do a good job with, and he would do those at the end, so the client would leave feeling successful," explains Winsor. "If someone is learning the Series of Five, you don't let them walk out the door right afterward. Have them do something simple on the Cadillac where they can feel they've done it right without too much explanation. The trainer should also be really positive: 'You do that really well. I'm really excited for us to move forward so you can change your body.' That's what's going to bring people in the door." And, God willing, keep them coming back. ☺

Got a  
Pro Zone idea?

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