

## Pleasing the Customer

### THE KEY TO HIGH ENROLLMENT

by Patti Komara

New students, new students, more students—aren't we as studio owners always worrying about gaining new students? We know that if we want to keep those doors open we've got to gain new students—right? Yes and No.

Instead of looking for ways to increase enrollment by focusing on new students, let's turn our efforts to the present student.

What do you presently do for the student that is already coming to your gym? You need to make them feel special! So special that they will tell all their friends. Every professional knows that as times change, you must change and upgrade procedures and techniques. But, you must never change your philosophy of delivering as much as possible to the customer at the lowest fair price.

That will make the difference in retaining your present students and inadvertently turning them into your best salesman. They will bring you more students than you can handle. Throughout the years it's been determined through questionnaires that more than 88% of our new customers are referred from our students. You've got to PLEASE THE CUSTOMER.

Who is our customer? Is it the students or the parents? The answer is both. Let's address both as our subjects.

Generally the first impression your customers encounter will be over the telephone. Please, please don't have one of those phone systems that say, "Press 1 for preschool, 2 for school-age." Ugh—awful. It should be a goal that each phone call is answered in no more than two rings. Make sure you have your best person answering the phone. You never have a second chance to make a first impression. It is extremely critical that a human is answering the phone, not a machine. Problems are caused by the person doing the over-the-phone registration and forgetting some important information. Don't let the new customer off the phone until all items on the "new student checklist" posted near the phone are completely discussed. Then, put the name and phone number on the "new student list" on the front desk bulletin board. Every morning the office staff should memorize the names and class times of the new students expected that day. When the apprehensive new customer walks into the door, she will be greeted by a friendly person behind the counter who says, "Hi—Mrs. Johnson? You're here with Michelle for the 9:30 four-year-old class, right? It's nice to meet you (with a firm handshake)."

After the necessary paperwork is finished, the office person should take the new customer on a tour of the facility noting: bathrooms, observations area, lost and found spot, etc. – especially mentioning other programs such as dance, boys' classes, and our Gym-N-Learn fitness based nursery school as they walk throughout the gym. When the class is ready to start, the office person should introduce the new student to the teacher. The key is to make that new customer feel as special as possible. At the conclusion of the

class the teacher should walk the new student to the parent while asking the child how they liked the class. Explain the reasons behind your activities in that class to the parents as well as your major philosophy. Our philosophy, which guides our every class, is to teach the children dance in a fun, safe environment and increase the child's self-confidence. Every class is designed to meet those goals.

That evening we mail out a "glad you could join us" postcard with a personal note. Within two days we reach the parents by phone. We ask how the child liked the class and if the parents had any question about the program.

What else can be done for the present student? We send a birthday card to each student. When a parent calls a child in sick, we mail a get-well card that day. If a child has a particularly good day, a special "certificate" is sent to the parents and child in the mail. If a parent makes a positive suggestion, or even a negative comment, we send them a thank you note with an "Exceptional Parent Award" certificate in the mail. If young students bring in coloring pages, we identify the artist and display it in the studio. If a child gives a teacher a gift—each instructor has embossed dance school thank you notes to express their appreciation through the mail. Children love getting mail and won't forget your kindness soon.

When a parent makes a negative comment, it must be handled very carefully. The dissatisfied customer who leaves will tell 10 people about their negative experience. Seven out of ten will not join. A happy customer, I'm sorry to report, tells on the average of two people about their positive experience. Always work with customers as you'd like

to be treated. If you've made a change that reflected a suggestion or a complaint, always make a "follow-up" call to thank them for the suggestion and tell them of the change.

We have another customer service slogan we live by. It's "give the customer what they expect". From the beginning, if you give the customer what they expect, they'll be more ready to accept you and your policies. And we must always inspect every aspect of our business to insure the highest quality of teaching, service, safety, and cleanliness. For example—people expect their child to be taught dance by a person who can dance. As instructors, we should try to demonstrate as often as possible. In a tumbling class, parents expect their child to learn a "somersault" and a cartwheel within a few weeks. Make that your priority. People expect prompt replies to their calls left on voice mail. Make that an important goal. They wanted to talk to you. You weren't there. You must get back to them as soon as possible. Make a list and insist on pursuing excellence in each of those areas. Quality is free. Give it to them.

After you give the customer what you feel they expect—then give them more. Have special events just for them. Christmas Parties, Easter Egg Hunts, or a Haunted House. You could provide guest speakers about aspects of raising children led by local experts. Hand out articles pertaining to children. Have an FYI bulletin board with information concerning children's health and fitness. Do more than they expect.

Many gyms expend a tremendous amount of money and effort to gain a new customer and often minimal effort to keep a customer. Listen to your customer complaints. Get out there and personally talk to them. It will tell you much the same thing a paid consultant would tell you. Have a suggestion box and implore your student's

parents to use it. Customers do business where they're treated right. Paradoxically they remember where they were not treated right much better than where they were. People respond in kind to people who are kind...kindness is an attitude.

Quality customer service starts when you transmit a positive attitude towards others. Secondly, you must identify the needs of your customers and then provide for those needs. Lastly, you score when a significant numbers of those with whom you conduct business return for more classes. With competition in our industry on the rise, and our greater understanding of our clients, it makes economic sense to give quality customer service. We know the attitude you send out is usually the attitude you'll get back.

The basic customer needs four things: To be understood; to feel welcomed; to feel important; to feel comfortable. Everyone has these needs. Brainstorm with your staff how a gym or dance school can fill these needs.

Our main goal is to not let a "present student" become a former student. Quality may bring them in, but excellent customer service will keep them. Knowledge is power, but only if applied. Take these ideas and PLEASE THE CUSTOMER!

## **Patti Komara's Bio**

Patti Komara has owned a gymnastics school in Dyer, Indiana since 1969 offering gymnastics, dance, swimming, and a fitness-based educational preschool called Gym-N-Learn. Patti began speaking at national seminars in 1981 and has led hundreds of training workshops. Patti's Tumblebear Connection has produced more than 80 instructional DVDs. She has written books on yearly lesson plans for The internationally known Tumblebear Gym Program, School-age Gymnastics, Dancing GymBears, YogaBears, CheerBears, Gym-N-Learn, and her very successful Swim Program. Patti co-authored the original USAG preschool KAT certification program. In 2003 she was named USAG Business Leader of the Year. In 2005 Patti was selected as Client of the Year by Action International and in 2006 was given the national service award by USAG. In 2009 Patti began formal consulting for those in our industry and in 2010 her gym, Patti's All-American, was named in her local newspaper as "Best of the Region" once again. Patti has over 6000 subscribers to her "In the Loop Monthly E-Newsletter" which she has published since February 2007.