

UPGRADE YOUR FRONT DESK OPERATIONS

By: Len Bell

ONE OF THE KEYS TO A SUCCESSFUL FITNESS center is the quality of service and productivity provided by the front desk staff. A concerted effort to increase the responsibilities and service levels of the front desk staff can positively affect sales, retention and revenue. Here are some things that can be done to raise the level of service provided by the front desk:

Staff the Front Desk for Success: It is common that the front desk employees are the lowest paid in a fitness center. If the budget allows, you may want to change your thinking and offer higher pay for higher quality employees. If your budget does not allow higher pay, you will need to find creative ways to reward these employees that don't cost you additional money (providing free personal training, nutrition consulting or memberships for family members, etc.) Look for quality people who want to be in a social environment or "get out of the house" and may not require a higher level of compensation. Retirees and stay-at-home moms or dads or college students who are trying to get into the industry and will start at the ground level, may be well suited for this work.

First and foremost, look for people who have a natural customer service mentality and are responsible. Make note of whether they were on time to the interview and be sure to check their references. When interviewing, role-play common situations at the center such as handling complaints or emergencies to be sure they will respond positively and with confidence.

Build Efficiency Into the Front Desk: All front desk employees should be trained on the phone system and should always acknowledge members as they come in and leave. Provide club-management software training to the front desk staff, so they can address many issues that come up during the course of their shift instead of calling management over to help. Good club management software can cue the staff on important information when a member checks in – member's name so they can

be properly greeted; member's birthday so staff can extend best wishes; expired accounts or credit cards so new information or contract renewal can be obtained.

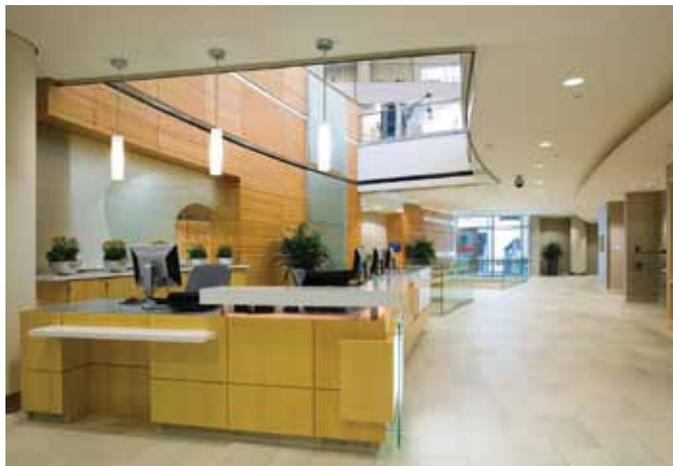
The best software companies offer free training at their offices or over the phone, and provide a comprehensive training manual with screenshots to answer questions that may arise. If the front desk staff is efficient and friendly, they will give a good first impression (improving new member sales) and help with retention of members who will feel comfortable using the center (and will refer friends!).

Train the Front Desk Staff to Increase Sales: The obvious way the front desk can bring in money is through selling goods and services. Stock the front desk with convenience items (razors, deodorant, batteries, etc), drinks, snacks and food. Train the staff on all of the center's offerings/programs and provide them with quality flyers/brochures to distribute to members and visitors. Your front desk can contribute to new sales efforts and help upsell existing members on additional programs.

Some centers find it effective to have the front desk staff bring in more revenue in more creative ways. With a little additional training, they can do email blasts (strong club management software makes it easy to send to targeted markets), or make referral, renewal or collection calls during slower times. Save money on administrative staff by training the front desk to enter new members, create schedules, add inventory, print reports, update communication logs, etc. This also frees up managers to do more position-specific tasks. Be sure your software allows check-in to run in the background while the staff is working on other tasks on the same computer – you don't want them to have to quit what they are doing so that a member can check in!

Use the Right Front Desk Software: Choosing the right software will help your staff be more efficient. Be sure it includes efficient check-in methods like a card scanner or fingerprint recognition and good search capabilities. Photos on the check-in screen allow the front desk to find members and limit non-member use. The point-of-sale module should be touch-screen compatible and/or able to scan UPC codes to sell items. Using an "auto-deduct" feature for member check-in on packages reduces errors and provides members up-to-date information on their account. An efficient time clock module eases the work at payroll time. If the security can be set to allow front desk employees limited access to certain modules instead of an "all or none" style, they can print useful reports and perform other helpful tasks without accessing confidential information.

Creating a more satisfying member experience at the front desk will go a long way towards increasing sales, improving retention and making everyone's job easier.



This front desk area is in the Dan Abraham Healthy Living Center at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. Architect of Record/ Design Leader: BWBR Architects; Wellness Programmer/Planner: PSA-Dewberry; Photography: Don F. Wong.

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