

Setting yourself up in business

Many people who work in the fitness industry aspire, at some point in their future, towards moving out of the club or facility environment and setting themselves up as a freelance business. This is an understandable objective as it can provide the flexibility, financial rewards and sense of achievement which draws many people to the industry in the first place. However, setting yourself up as self-employed can be perceived of as a daunting and challenging process, so REPs has offered some ideas and insight into how to prepare, promote and market when setting up a successful business.

Preparation

One of the first major hurdles to overcome is the concept of being self-employed. For many people, this is a significant psychological barrier, therefore it is important to be realistic and clear in your goals. Some important things to consider include:

- Do you have, or can you acquire, sufficient money to invest in equipment and marketing? Depending on how you set yourself up, be prepared for an initial expenditure of somewhere in the £2,000-£10,000 range.
- Are you able to financially sustain a period of time when you may be earning less than you would in full-time employment and less than you might need to meet your regular financial commitments? If the answer is no, then it would be wise to delay becoming self-employed until you can. A good rule of thumb is to have savings equivalent to 4-6 months of your regular outgoings so that you can concentrate on building your business rather than be worried about money and paying your bills.

Area

The geographical area you want to work in and concentrate your marketing on will be dictated by a number of factors. These include:

- Your target market.
- Your mode of transport.
- Variations in travel time throughout the day. If you are a mobile personal trainer, you may wish to limit travel time to your clients to 30 minutes. However, how far you can travel in 30 minutes at 06:00 can be very different to how far you can travel at 08:00 in many towns and cities.
- You may live in a different economic area to your target client base, which may add to your distance or travel time.

Your Services

What sort of personal trainer are you going to be? The answer to this question is fundamentally important as it will affect the hours you work, your potential income, and how you market yourself. Some of the areas you need to consider are:

- Are you going to specialise in a certain type of client or are you going to take on any client who comes your way? There are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches, but the general advice for most new self-employed PTs is to start off as a generalist and specialise only when you can afford to do so. By marketing yourself as a specialist (e.g. post-natal exercise) you may automatically turn away many potential clients who in the early days of your business you would rather have.
- What days of the week/hours of the day are you willing to work? The fitness industry, like any service industry, generally operates outside of 'normal' work hours. Therefore, be prepared for lots of early mornings, late evenings and weekends. If this is a problem, because of childcare commitments, for example, then you should be prepared to turn away potential new clients. This is not to say that you can't work Monday to Friday, 09:00-15:00, but you may need to accept that the number of clients you have will be limited by this.
- Where are you going to train your clients? Possible locations include their home or garden, a studio (either your own or one you rent), a park or beach, or a converted area in your own home (which raises legal and insurance issues for using your home as place of work). If using a public outdoor space like a park, you may wish to check if the local authority allows or charges for commercial activity to take place in their open spaces. The Royal Parks in London require that you have a license to conduct personal training in their parks ([visit <http://www.royalparks.org.uk/business/fitness-training> for more details](http://www.royalparks.org.uk/business/fitness-training)). Other Local Authorities around the country may have similar requirements.

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- What equipment are you going to provide? The more you have, the greater the variety of sessions you will be able to offer your clients. Items you may wish to consider include (but are not limited to):
 - **Mats (have a few in case they get mucky)**
 - **Weights (dumbbells, medicine balls, ViPR, kettle bells etc.)**
 - **A step block or bench**
 - **Boxing/martial arts mitts/gloves/pads**
 - **Suspension straps**
 - **Footwork ladders, hurdles, cones**
 - **Stopwatch, heart rate monitor, GymBoss**
 - **Stability balls, Bosu, foam rollers or pads**
- How are you going to transport yourself and your equipment if you decide to be mobile? When answering this question consider the visual impact in terms of professionalism in turning up in a vehicle that is branded with your details. Also bear in mind the marketing benefit of driving round your local area in such a vehicle – people will see it and take notice. You may also wish to consider leasing a vehicle rather than buying one, and bear in mind that vehicle costs are legitimate business expenses which can be claimed on your tax return.

Pricing

How much are you going to charge? This is a big decision as it will ultimately dictate your income. It is important to understand that what personal trainers sell are units of time (hours), with their skills and knowledge being what you fill that time with. You are therefore looking to both maximize your earnings per unit of time (hourly rate) and the number of hours you are earning in. Another thing to think about here is the psychology of buying a service like personal training. Personal training is not a necessity, rather it is a discretionary spend and a luxury item. People can choose to spend their money on a variety of luxury items such as clothes, nights out, handbags or holidays. To convince them to spend it on you, you have to be able to show them that there is a benefit and a value to their purchase.

The factors to consider when setting your price include:

- What is your competition charging? Research and find out what your local competitors are doing in terms of the services they offer and the prices they charge. Decide whether you are going to charge more, charge less or charge the same as your competitors. Each option has different implications on the level of service you provide; people will only pay greater fees if they perceive that they are getting an exceptional service.
- Consider having off-peak pricing for those times of the day which are generally quieter. This may attract clients who consider your top rate too high.
- Offer discounted rates for group training. The advantage of this is that it is perceived as cheaper and more affordable by clients, but can maximize your hourly rate. For example, if your normal rate is £40 per hour, you could instead have 6 people paying £8 each which means you earn £48 for that hour instead of £40, yet each client is paying considerably less and are more likely to stick with it.
- Offer packages and block bookings. This can be as a group of sessions booked and paid for as a unit, or a package offering training and nutritional advice for a fixed period of time such as 12 weeks. When paying a large amount of money up front, people expect to be receiving a better deal or cheaper rate, but be careful about giving too much of your time away. As an example, if you run a deal of 'buy 10 sessions pay for 9' this means that you are effectively giving away 10% of your earning potential.

Marketing

How you market yourself to attract new clients is the cornerstone of success for any new PT business. It is also the area where most fitness people are weakest, and where the recently self-employed are least willing to spend money, as the return is not immediately apparent. However, money spent wisely can determine the success or otherwise of your business.

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Websites

One of the key elements and requirements of any modern business is to have an attractive, professional website. The vast majority of potential clients look for local business and service online, so having an accessible website is important. If you are on a tight budget, consider one of the online website building services such as wix.com, godaddy.com or moonfruit.com which allow you to build, customise and personalise your own website from a basic template. Typically these services charge a monthly subscription and offer a budget conscious solution.

A (usually) more expensive option is to employ a website designer. This can range in price from a couple of hundreds of pounds to a couple of thousands of pounds, so do shop around. The service offered here is typically more personal, and your website may well come with more features, making it look and feel more professional.

Whichever option you choose, it's important that the site reflects you and the type of service you will offer; the aim of the website is to get people to contact you. The content you use to describe yourself and your style is important. Words such as 'patient', 'caring' and 'friendly' are just as important for people to read as 'motivating' or 'inspirational'. Also, be careful of (or avoid) using phrases such as 'guaranteed results' on your website, this may lead to problems as the word 'guarantee' has legal connotations and you cannot control your clients' lifestyles 100% of the time.

Once the website has been developed, the next step is to get it on the first page of a web search. Web designers will offer a service to optimise the site and have it hitting the top of the search engines; they will of course charge a fee for this. Another option to consider is enrolling on the various online business directories which exist, such as yell.com, thebestof.co.uk or thomsondirectories.com. These can be a very effective low cost way getting on the first page of a web search.

Networking

The use of networking clubs to gain business is an area which a lot of people have not really heard of or considered. It can however be a very productive way of gaining new business as it allows you to meet people face-to-face and charm them with your personality. The basic idea of these clubs is that they meet on a regular basis, often weekly, with the intent of giving each other business leads and referrals. They include such organisations as BNI (Business Networking International), BRE (Business Referral Exchange) and 4Networking. The significant advantage of networking clubs is that in our line of business where the personal touch is key, it gives your potential clients a chance to get to know you better and buy into you as a person.

Client Retention

Like any business, it is easier to keep existing clients than to be continually looking for new ones. A useful motto to remember is: 'People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care' and that attitude often separates successful from unsuccessful trainers. Consider the following Dos and Don'ts:

Do

- Make the session about your client. Your client is paying you and should therefore receive your full focus, attention and energy.
- Make the client feel important by talking about their life. Find out the names of their partner/family/pets and ask about them. Talk about their day at work, their hobbies or even the weekend they just had. Show interest in them as a person rather than just a source of income.
- Remember their birthday and get them a card (and present). Respect religious and cultural holidays and give appropriate acknowledgments and greetings.
- Go the extra mile for them, such as writing them exercise plans for when they go on holiday, or giving tips to their family members who ask for advice. Avoid charging for these and it will be seen as you adding value to your cost.
- Be a shoulder to cry on when required. Many clients view their PT as someone they can unload their problems onto, but be discrete and confidential with what you are told.
- Be reliable and punctual. If you have promised something, keep that promise.
- Train your client in the way that is most appropriate for them, rather than the way that you prefer. HIIT isn't appropriate for everyone!

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Don't

- Talk about yourself or your problems unless they specifically ask.
- Take phone calls, text messages or update your social media whilst working with them.
- Get involved in the personal life or problems of your clients. Keep a professional distance.
- Be late, unprepared, hungover or take them for granted.

Business Type and Tax Issues

The simplest and best advice here is to get an accountant from the beginning. They will be able to advise you on the best way to set up your business, what you need to record and keep for tax purposes, what you can claim as legitimate expenses and business costs, how to report to the tax office and other associated issues.

It is also advisable to talk to your bank about setting up a business bank account. You would expect to pay a monthly charge for this, but this is often waived for the first 12-18 months whilst you get yourself up and running. They will also be able to offer you help on putting together a business plan, which is a great discipline in terms of clarifying your ideas and your budget.

Summary

Here are the top 10 tips for PT business success:

- 1 Write a business plan – get your bank or accountant to help
- 2 Get an accountant
- 3 Get a website
- 4 Join a networking club
- 5 Join at least one online business directory
- 6 Organise your finances so you can afford a few months of limited income
- 7 Decide on a pricing structure
- 8 Decide where you are going to train your clients and what equipment you need
- 9 Look after your clients – they are your life
- 10 Have fun!