

The Importance of Building Relationships in Close Service Encounters

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Personal training used to be viewed as a service for high-end customers and celebrities, but is now utilized by a variety of consumers. In the past twenty years gym membership in the U.S. has increased from 17.3 million to 41.3 million people. The number of gym facilities has increased from 11,804 to almost 27,000 (IHRSA Annual Trend Report, 2005). Personal training or instruction is not only prominent only in the fitness industry; it is also a common form of instruction in music, voice development, art, dance, athletics (such as tennis and golf), vocational trades, business skills development, and image consulting.

In 1998, it was estimated that over 4 million consumers in the U.S. used personal training services (American Fitness Professionals & Associates). Many of today's consumers do not have the time it takes to work out individually or in group sessions. The demand for personal training is currently increasing within consumer segments such as retirees, high school and college students, mothers, and career focused consumers. This trend is congruent with Western society's overall crunch for time and immediate desire for satisfaction.

While previous research has focused on relationships between large firms and their customers, few studies have looked at the joint effort in one-on-one professional service relationships. This study addresses the development of personal relationships, in the line of Price and Arnould's (1999) research on commercial relationships, by exploring the two areas of personal training and consumer goals of engaging in bodily transformations. Here I identify the process of improving the relationship quality between

personal trainers and consumers as well as determine underlying factors of consumer loyalty in one-on-one service encounters.

Relationship quality has previously been defined as a combination of commitment, trust, satisfaction, relationship benefits, and values of both service-provider and consumer. The value that consumers gain from the relationship is an important antecedent to relationship quality. In the absence of additional value perceived by the client, personal training would not be sought after. Palmatier, Dant, Grewal and Evans (2006) found that commitment, trust, relationship satisfaction and relationship quality are the main factors driving mutually satisfying outcomes.

When engaging in a personal training service, the consumer releases his or her body to the instructions and care of the personal trainer. In other words, the personal trainer is in charge and controls the service encounter, while the consumer although engaged in physical activities, has a passive role in the service process. This makes the relationships developed between personal trainers and consumers unique as the consumers put themselves in a vulnerable position where trust and commitment are essential for them in order to experience a positive procedural outcome. Although the marketing literature offers numerous definitions of trust, here I define it as a mutual belief that both parties are focused on the agreed goals and expectations. Relationship commitment, especially in a service encounter, is the effort a consumer is willing to put into a relationship to maintain relations with a business or service provider. However, due to the exposed role of the consumer in personal training, unless the personal trainer is equally committed to the consumer, the consumer may switch to a trainer who is more dedicated, empathetic, and who is more personally involved in meeting the consumer's

individual needs. Relationship satisfaction arises if the performance of the service exceeds the customer's expectations.

To find out what consumers engaged in personal training value in their service provider, in-depth interviews were conducted in two southwestern cities throughout 2005 and 2006. Data from sixteen participants (or eight consumer-personal trainer pairs), both males and females, varying from 23-72 years of age, were coded, analyzed and interpreted.

Training philosophy, knowledge, and fitness education level of the personal trainer, as well as personality, courtesy, and empathy were found to be important characteristics for consumers to consider when choosing a trainer. Commitment and trust are essential and must be established in the first few sessions when the consumer is still in the vulnerable stage of disclosing personal concerns and desires to the trainer. Through the one-on-one relationship, the trainer gets to know his or her clients and increases the chances of improving the client's experience and perceived value of the service. It is important for personal trainers to be humble and sensitive to each client's specific support needs, be it lack of self-confidence, the need for instrumental guidance or as an injury precaution. The emerging themes of this study illustrate that consumers differ greatly in the derived value of staying with a personal trainer. Most consumers seem to value a supportive and empathetic trainer, while others are motivated by being in a love/hate relationship with their trainer. However, in order to obtain consumer satisfaction and loyalty service providers need to satisfy both the technical and the functional outcome of the service. That is, that the individual consumer's goal of the

training is reached and that individual support needs are met throughout the repeated service encounter.

References

Palmatier, Robert W., Dant, Rajiv P., Grewal, Dhruv., and Evans, Kenneth R. (2006), "Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Relationship Marketing: A Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 70 Issue 4, p136-153

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In addition to the works listed above, the author was informed by the following sources:

<http://www.afpafitness.com/NBFETimeline.htm>

<http://cms.ihrsa.org/IHRSA/viewPage.cfm?pageId=804>