



## COMMON PRACTICE FOR PERSONAL TRAINERS THAT SHOULD NOT BE SO COMMON—PART 1: EXAMINATION OF COMMON PRACTICES

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Over the last three decades the personal training profession has progressed from a part-time or secondary income to a full-time and financially sound career choice. However, during that time certain industry strategies have been put in place as “common practice.” These common practices can include price discounts for larger session packages, huge startup discounts to first-time clients, cookie-cutter program designs for any and all clients, fluctuated discount pricing based on referrals, and low barrier marketing techniques to the masses, just to name a few.

As new personal trainers enter the workforce they learn about these common practices by watching or working with other trainers in the industry. Observing, shadowing, interning, or mentoring programs are great ways to learn about the business of personal training. Where the problem can occur is in “who” they are observing and learning from and what type of “common practices” they are being taught. The following are a few common practices new personal trainers might observe.

### High Foot Traffic with High Turnover Rates

- Some personal training businesses are run inside facilities or in locations with extremely high numbers of potential clients (foot traffic) searching for a personal trainer. With a high number of interested leads, these personal trainers will focus on signing clients up for large session packages (30 to 50+ sessions) baiting the client with a large discount. The client bites and invests thousands of dollars with the potential to be disappointed with the quality of their trainer.
- In most cases, these non-refundable sessions are lost as the client is frustrated with their lack of results, or the professionalism of the trainer, and decides to discontinue their training program. The trainer then books another client on top of the original client’s scheduled time collecting double on their commission. This type of business model does not help build the reputation of a career-based personal trainer and often ends in numerous complaints to management.

### The More You Buy, the Cheaper the Price

- Discounting the overall investment for the client based on how many sessions or how long they commit to a training

schedule is a common practice that many personal trainers implement with the mindset of locking up longer term investments and guaranteed income from a potential client. Although a longer commitment is achieved, the personal trainer has devalued their services to a point that can be challenging to raise in future purchases (2).

- For example, rates for a one-on-one training session could run \$65 for a single session but if the client purchases 10 sessions the price drops to \$55 each, with 25 sessions the price drops to \$45 each, and with 50 sessions the price drops again to \$35 each. The question now becomes, what is the trainer’s “true value” for one session? Is it \$65 or \$35? Such a large discrepancy leaves the consumer wondering why the price difference varies so much, ultimately leaving them questioning the quality of the services they are seeking (5).
- True professionals know their value and place a single solid price on it as that is the exchange rate for their time. This process of learning one’s true value and establishing a set price may take some time. However, competitive and reliable rates show a sturdy and sound business model leaving the consumer feeling secure in their purchase and proud to be a paying customer.

### The Sales Hook and Lateral Pass

- Some business models utilize a “tag-team” approach in which the more sales-based team member meets with the potential client and walks them through the initial interview and consultation (3). They take their measurements, sell them a multi-vitamin, and walk them through the ladder of session packages ultimately leading the client to purchasing the lowest single session rate (which also happens to be the biggest initial investment).
- With the paperwork signed and the non-refundable sessions locked up, the salesman then introduces the new client to their “new” personal trainer. The client is shocked as the smooth-talking professional they thought they were going to be working with informs them that they are just the first step of the client’s healthcare team and that their trusted colleague will take good care of them.

- The “trusted colleague,” may or may not have experience working with clients; however, the bigger issue is that the client and trainer rapport (trust and value) is best established from the very beginning. Introducing a new professional into the mix this late in the processes can be a cause for alarm. Unfortunately, this business model is run in many gyms and fitness centers around the world. However, well educated consumers with high expectations have slowly started to make dents in this business model.

### **Cookie Cutter Programing**

- Some facilities implement a “community” workout program design model that all members of the gym participate in. These workouts can be very challenging for some clients and, in some cases, not appropriate for others. Cookie cutter program designs lack the ability to customize movement patterns per the specific demands/needs of each client (4).
- This becomes a question of what the client “needs” versus what the personal trainer “wants” the client or group to perform that day. As a fitness professional, the personal trainer needs to deliver a product specific to the goals, per the physical limitations and/or the ability level of the client. In many cases, a community workout program design does not accomplish these goals.

### **Trial Workout with Health History and Paperwork**

- When a potential client is interested in pursuing personal training they typically want to come in and sample the product before they commit. It is common practice for personal trainers to offer a trial workout to a client. However, in many cases the initial meeting, proper paperwork, and health history is not attained beforehand. Often, a liability form is the only paperwork completed as the client quickly initials a form and jumps into a workout (1). There are three risks a personal trainer takes by not having an initial interview and consultation with a new potential client prior to their trial workout:
  - » First, the personal trainer has limited or no knowledge of any existing physical limitations of the client. The potential risk of injury is very high as the trainer may put the client into vulnerable positions without knowing it. The potential client could get injured during their trial workout losing their business and potentially damaging the reputation of the personal trainer.
  - » Second, is the personal trainer has little or no knowledge of the client’s training goals. Without knowing the reasons in which the client would like to train, the personal trainer creates a workout without purpose. The client may have a physical limitation they want to improve, they may want to learn the power lifts, or they may have plans to climb a mountain. Without collecting this data, the personal trainer creates a workout that lacks the intention of the client’s goal and thus, showcases little or no value to the client. The personal trainer may have the ability to provide exactly what they client wants and needs; however, the lack of proper procedure has limited the trainer’s ability to showcase their value.

- » Third, is the personal trainer cannot establish and build trust, value, and rapport with the client prior to their training session. Personal training is just that, “personal,” and without the opportunity to connect with the client, learn about their personality type, and gauge their expectations, the personal trainer will have a challenging time gaining the client’s confidence during one trial workout. Meeting with a potential client prior to their trial session also allows the trainer to showcase their experience and expertise, to answer any questions, and to discuss their training philosophy as to how and why it is a good fit for them.

### **Referral Discounts**

- It is common practice in many facilities to offer discounted rates for clients who refer in friends, family, or colleagues. Financial discount rewards are often useful marketing techniques for personal trainers; however, they can backfire in two ways:
  - » First, clients may get to know each other and spend time together outside of the gym. Price comparisons can occur making for some awkward discussion for the personal trainer in the future. Even with the explanation of earning the financial discount in return for referrals, longer tenured clients may take offense to the price cut.
  - » Second, is when a current client “quotes” a new potential client their discounted price rate as the regular rate. With a preconceived price range set, the potential client comes to their first session prepared to pay a certain rate only to be told something different by the personal trainer. This can make for an awkward discussion and the potential loss of a new client, and they may already have mixed emotions about their business practices.

Starting into the personal training business is a very exciting endeavor full of great potential, possibilities for success, and endless opportunities to help others. However, many of the “common practices” found in today’s personal training industry are not the most ethical or effective tactics to implement in order to build a successful career as a fitness professional. Selecting a mentor that can teach proper business practices as well as program design and other personal training components is crucial to a novice trainer’s success. The development of sound, consistent, and reliable business practices will set standards for a fitness professional as they build a long and potentially lucrative career in the personal training industry.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Robert Linkul was the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) Personal Trainer of the Year in 2012. He is currently a volunteer with the NSCA as the Southwest Regional Coordinator and Committee Chairman for the Personal Trainers Special Interest Group (SIG). Linkul is the Career Development columnist for the NSCA’s *Personal Training Quarterly* (PTQ) publication and speaks internationally on career development techniques for personal trainers. Linkul mentors personal training students and rookie trainers entering the industry on business strategies, client retention, and professional longevity. Linkul has been in the industry since 1999, and owns and operates his own personal training studio in Sacramento, CA.



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