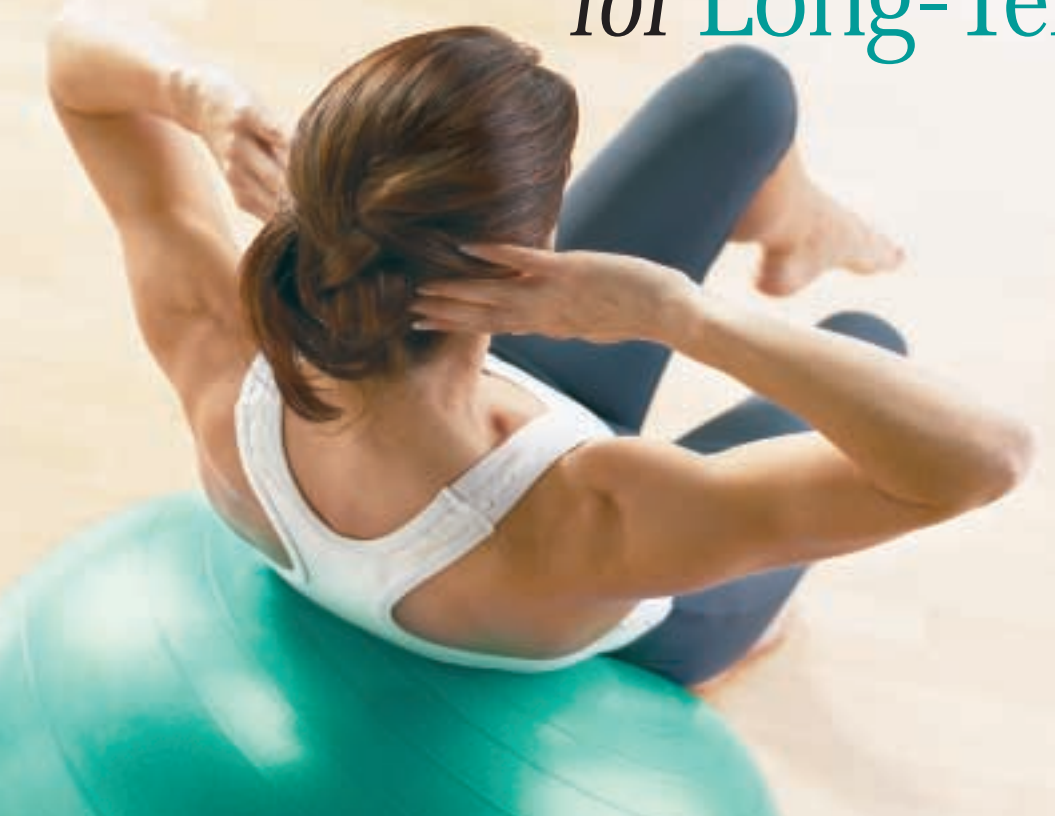


Marketing Pilates for Long-Term Success

by Lindsay G. Merrithew



As you plan your marketing strategies, keep in mind that the goal is to attract and retain clients. Before you roll out your promotional marketing campaign, be sure you have enough qualified instructors to handle the demand. A short waiting list can help create a buzz when you launch your program, but members will either give up or move on if you can't deliver the goods within a reasonable period of time, so be careful not to over market.

Here are the top 10 tactics that have been used successfully by facilities to promote their pilates programs:

1 Begin with a great product. Start by selecting a reputable, branded pilates program that reflects your own exercise philosophy and be sure to differentiate it from other fitness offerings within your facility, remember most people look to pilates either to complement their current regime or as an effective alternative.

2 Involve staff and club members from the get-go. As you prepare to launch your pilates program, outline your plans and keep everyone posted on your progress with monthly updates, in print and via e-mail. Ensure front office staff are clear on registration procedures and can effectively sell the program. Branded staff t-shirts are a great way to peak the interest of members (and they're always a popular promotional give-away).



Lindsay G. Merrithew is President and CEO of STOTT PILATES™, a subsidiary of Merrithew Corporation. For more information about STOTT PILATES call 1-800-910-0001 (N. America), 0800-328-5676 (U.K.) or visit www.stottpilates.com.

Pilates is currently the fastest-growing exercise method in North America, but that doesn't mean you can sit back and wait for clients or members to walk through the door and ask about your program. If you've gone to the trouble of incorporating a pilates program, hiring qualified instructors and investing in the space and equipment required, you'll want clients and potential clients to embrace your program for years to come. Launching your pilates program and making it successful not only requires establishing a strong foundation but also a solid marketing plan.

As with any good marketing plan, you should start planning months before launching your pilates program. Start by identifying your target markets – inside and outside your facility – using available internal and external market research. If you plan to offer group mat and reformer-based classes as well as personal training using a variety of pilates equipment, keep in mind that these programs may appeal to slightly different markets, with some crossover. For example, mat classes are often included with standard membership fees, while group reformer classes command a surcharge. Personal pilates training in a dedicated studio usually

yields a personal training fee. Some people will be more suited to group classes, as will their budgets, while others may prefer personal attention and may have the disposable income to support this. Still others will balance pilates group sessions with one-on-one training.

The most successful (and least costly) strategies you can employ to create awareness and demand for your pilates program will involve grass roots relationship marketing tactics. They include such things as referral programs, promotional events, media relations and internal communications (instructor announcements, newsletters, e-mail broadcasts, in-house television bulletins, posters and flyers).

Another cost-effective medium that should not be overlooked in communicating with members, potential members and the press, is your club website. Traditional print advertising and direct mail, though generally more costly, may also be appropriate considerations for attracting new members to your facility or enhancing your club's image, but never overlook the power of relationship marketing and the positive word-of-mouth promotion it can generate.

3 Ask for help. Consult with your pilates supplier or fitness association to see what kind of marketing support they can provide. Some provide stock flyers, ads, promotional posters, client charts, direct mail post-cards, banners, t-shirts and media relations advice. Start using these tools at least a month before you launch your program.

4 Develop your class schedule and fee structure wisely. To ensure your program gets off to a strong start, start by registering people for a series of essential level classes. As your program gets underway, introduce intermediate then advanced level classes. Once your program is established, you can add variety and keep members motivated by offering different class formats. If you plan to charge extra for classes or permit non-members to join your program, clearly outline both the costs and the benefits. If you have a dedicated space outfitted with pilates equipment, be sure to establish an appropriate pricing structure for private, semi-private and small group sessions. Your personal training pricing model will provide a good benchmark.



5 Feature your instructors. Since your instructors will arguably make or break the success of your program, be sure to introduce them to club members by featuring them in your communication. Continue this practice as your program and instructor roster grows.



6 Encourage media interest. Prepare a press kit, including a news release about your new program, relevant instructor bios and photos, club background and fact sheet. Have it ready to give to local media – print, radio and TV – who attend your big launch (for those who don't attend, mail it to them the next day and follow up with the offer of a free class or private session). Update your kit regularly and use any published articles to further promote your program to your members and potential members.

7 Cultivate instructor endorsement. Conduct regular master classes for group fitness instructors and personal trainers on your team. It will help them cross-sell your pilates program and may even interest them enough to get trained and certified (you can never have too many certified pilates instructors).

8 Create "try before you buy" experiences. Launch your program (early fall or between January and April is recommended, as the summer months are typically slower) with one or more free lunch hour and after work lecture-demos. Let people know they can participate if they come dressed comfortably. Don't forget to sign people up for an introductory group series or private session, or get their names for follow-up communication.

Draw people to your launch with ads in your local community paper, flyers or invitations. Advise the media two weeks in advance with a "media alert" giving them (and their readers or viewers) all the pertinent details. The free lecture-demo format can be repeated whenever you introduce a new class or session.

The key to getting people hooked on pilates is getting them to try it.

9 Encourage and reward referrals. As you probably already know, there is no more effective marketing tool than positive endorsement from local health authorities, celebrities, pro athletes and, of course,

your members. Invite influential health professionals to a free lecture-demo style presentation and introduce them to a referral plan – many chiropractors, massage therapists, physical therapists and a growing number of HMOs will recommend pilates to their patients (some insurers will even cover the cost).

Be sure to provide lots of credible information about the benefits of pilates as well as handy referral cards making it easy for others to refer your program.

To thank your referral sources, you might cross-promote their services to your members or offer them a professional discount. This type of referral program also works well with your dedicated pilates clients too – encourage them to refer a friend then reward them with a gift or a discount on their next series of sessions. Remember, these are important relationships built on trust and mutual respect, so you should build them carefully.

10 Stay connected. Once your program is up and running, refresh your marketing plan annually. To keep your strategies on target, be sure to stay on top of changes in demographic and psychographic trends.

And don't forget to tap into your greatest resource – your loyal pilates clients. You can learn a great deal about what is working and what isn't by simply communicating with regular clients – use surveys and face-to-face communication to find out what they like, don't like or would like to see – then refine your pilates program and your marketing communications plan appropriately.

Once your program has officially launched, monitor your successes (and failures), listen to your market (clients and potential clients), and keep creating, communicating and motivating. Because pilates offers so many benefits and feels so good, once your clients are hooked, they'll become your very best marketing vehicles. ■