

Creating Compelling Experiences

By Lawrence Biscontini, MA

How to give clients a fitness class that's truly memorable.

Welcome to the Crash Course in Excellence column, a practical series with takeaway strategies. These useful methods will help you rise, like cream, to the top of your craft. The column will address excellence and innovation in fitness in five installments. You'll learn how to



- generate wonderful experiences;
- use the “fabulous five” considerations to improve communication skills;
- learn the art, the why and the how of bilateral evaluations;
- develop fitness scripts for excellence in customer service; and
- cross-promote programming.

In part one of our crash course, let's address four tips that you can learn today and implement tomorrow, and that will help you make a significant impact toward greatness.

Tip #1: Be Both Professional *and* Popular

When we teach, we educate and entertain. In this course, **education** means being able to bring about an independent change in behavior, and **entertainment** means being able to engage participants in a compelling manner. Our role, therefore, is one of **educating + entertaining = edutainment**.

When we edutain, we must be both popular and professional. Being a *popular* instructor is crucial in the numbers game of filling classes. Similarly, being *professional* proves important as we teach according to our certifications' standards and codes of ethics. A firm commitment not to stray from those guidelines, while still being innovative, sets “cream” instructors apart from the competition.

Not all instructors are both popular and professional. Some popular instructors teach to packed classes, but may be teaching outdated, unsafe exercises. Alternatively, some professional instructors may possess many certifications and hold amazing resumés, but can't cue themselves out of a paper bag or build class numbers.

Takeaway. Cream instructors are both popular *and* professional. Ask yourself where your strength is, and use strategies from this series of articles to develop skills in your weaker area.

Tip #2: Set a Theme

An average teacher leads a class, but an outstanding educator designs an experience. Truly, when this person is in charge, there is the feeling of a Broadway or Hollywood type of experience taking place because *everything* matters and “speaks.” All aspects of a class come together to create that experience, and it usually starts with a theme. A theme is a central focus point that instructors want their students to maintain and see as a thread woven throughout the class. Len Kravitz, PhD, associate professor at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, states a theme at the start and end of each of his visual-driven lectures. Here are some of my favorites:

- breath
- personal best
- decreasing stress
- making circles
- increasing intensity
- balance
- speed
- incorporating words found in the lyrics of the song playlist for that day

Takeaway. Try choosing one aspect of the experience you are creating for your students as a theme, and invite your students to concentrate on this theme throughout class.

Tip #3: Utilize the Five Senses

Outstanding fitness professionals don’t merely teach a class or train a client. They use the five senses to heighten the experience. Consider this example: Steve Feinberg, founder and creator of Speedball Fitness in New York City, incorporates the sense of sight by changing the lighting every 10 minutes, creating a different feel for each section of class.

Consider these ways to use the five senses when you design your experiences:

Sound. I choose music that complements the experience in a thematic way. That is, I try to emphasize my class theme with the lyrics in the music. Above all, I consciously attempt to select either silence or music so that it adds to, rather than detracts from, the overall experience.

Smell. When appropriate, I use aromatherapy, via sprays or diffusers, to complement a particular class. For example, lavender relaxes clients in yoga, while sandalwood invigorates them during cycling.

Taste. I use the sense of taste in two ways in my classes. The first is literal: during a seated relaxation, I offer candy flavored with natural mint, which complements the aromatherapy spray of the same scent, which, in turn, complements a theme of cooling breath.

The second way I use taste is figurative. Great instructors provide experiences in good taste, which to me means using inclusive language, cuing with a lot of positive feedback and avoiding offensive and politically incorrect terminology.

Sight. Some fitness pros use their attire and the class environment to please the clients' visual sense. One instructor I know color-coordinates her eye shadow and pedicure colors with the color of the yoga mat she will use in a particular class. Another instructor coordinates colored candles with the different chakras she chooses to emphasize on any given day.

Touch. You can touch clients physically via massage, with their verbal permission. When you teach something physical, like exercise, you affect the body. When you teach something emotional, you invoke an additional meaning of touch. Jay Blahnik, 1996 IDEA Instructor of the Year, consistently blends an ideal amount of personal anecdote into his sessions in an inspirational way that "touches" his participants. Make a note of simple, inspirational stories to share with your clients.

Takeaway. Incorporate as many of the five senses as possible into your experiences.

Tip #4: Openings and Closings

The beginning and ending of a class are absolutely crucial. Think about the classes you've attended for your own fun. Don't you usually remember the first 5 minutes and the last 5 minutes?

I have always found that a *formal, memorized* introduction--regardless of personal style inside of the experience--both defines the purpose of a class and sets a professional tone. I devised introductions and conclusions for each of the 70 classes I created at the Golden Door in Fajardo, Puerto Rico, and my instructors memorized them. This strategy has created a Starbucks-like level of consistency to group exercise.

Here are some ideas other instructors use, based on my observations:

- Mindy Mylrea, 1999 IDEA Instructor of the Year, always gets her participants to laugh in the first 5 minutes of her sessions. This ice-breaker helps de-stress clients.
- Keli Roberts, 2003 IDEA Instructor of the Year, often starts a session by revealing the new research that supports the workout.
- Maureen Hagan, 2006 IDEA Fitness Instructor of the Year, always describes at the start of a session exactly “what you are going to get” in terms of both theory and movement to build up your expectations and excitement.

Takeaway. Start and finish each experience with a unique, but *prepared*, style.

You: The Cream of the Crop

Being a “cream instructor” really means rising to the top in creating enthralling experiences every time you teach. From devising themes to incorporating the five senses into all aspects of education, you truly will be both popular and professional when you incorporate some of these suggestions.

In the next column, we'll look at five considerations to improve communication skills for every experience you create.

Lawrence Biscontini, MA, has won multiple Instructor of the Year awards from ECA (2009), IDEA (2004), Can-Fit-Pro (2004) and ACE (2002) and works as a mindful movement specialist and creative consultant. His newest book, Cream Rises: Excellence in Private and Group Education, elaborates on many of the concepts discussed in this article and in future columns. Reach him at www.findlawrence.com

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