

Maximize Your Time—and Increase Your Income— With Group Personal Training Sessions

By Carrie Myers Smith

The ACE 2005 Trend Predictions report named group training as one of the hottest up and coming trends—and for good reason. More and more trainers are jumping on the group training bandwagon, which offers benefits to both trainer and client.

Case in point: “One year ago, we started an extensive group personal training program that offers clients the ability to train with a personal trainer as often as six times per week at a fraction of the cost of private training,” says Sherri McMillan, M.Sc., co-owner of Northwest Personal Training and Fitness Education in Vancouver, Wash.

A Popular—and Profitable—Concept

Group training typically involves two to five clients, working out together, supervised by one trainer. Because there is less one-on-one time per client, the client is charged less than they would be for individual training, but more than they would for a group exercise class. McMillan explains that two weeks of group training costs about the same as one hour of private training. “This program has allowed us to offer personal training to a whole market of people who couldn’t afford private training services.”

But don’t think that McMillan is making any less money. Because clients are sharing sessions, most professionals set their rates so that, regardless of the number of clients, the total income for one session is actually more than it would be for a private session with a single client. “We currently have over 80 people enrolled in the program, generating over \$8,000 per month in revenues for our company.”

Cathy Moxley, M.A., C.S.C.S., owner of

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Fitness InSight in Germantown, Md., says that when she trains two individuals together, she charges 50 percent more than for a single client hourly rate. This adds up to savings for the clients, and a greater hourly wage for the trainer.

But the benefits aren’t purely monetary. “The group atmosphere is very motivating for clients,” says Derek Dodd, owner of ActiveLifestyles Wellness Solutions in West Palm Beach, Fla.

“And the social aspects improve attrition,” adds Keli Roberts, a personal trainer and director of group exercise for Equinox in Pasadena, Calif.

Theresa Merz, a senior trainer for YogaFit Training Systems Worldwide, finds that once her group training clients have formed a bond and gotten to know each other, they start working out together between sessions.

The group environment empowers clients as they draw motivation and energy from one another, says Karl List, a Gold’s Gym

trainer in Venice, Calif. He points out that this creates a stronger and more independent-minded client, as well, which makes it a perfect option for trainers who feel as though they do more babysitting than training with some of their one-on-one clients.

Some trainers find they get as much out of group training as the clients. “I enjoy working with small groups over one-on-one personal training,” says Monica Bocks, a trainer and licensed Wellcoach in Truckee, Calif. “There’s more energy, more interaction and a lot of laughs!”

“When I’m training a group,” says Brian Schiff, a trainer in Detroit, Mich., “I am exposed to certain things that I would not notice when training just one person. The more people [there are in a class], the more experiences and styles I can pick up on. I notice new postures and structures. This gives me the opportunity to learn and improve my own skills.”

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TRAINING TIP

No matter how you slice it, group training is a win-win situation for all involved. Here are some suggestions for setting up your group sessions.

- Have everyone do the same exercises all together, helping each client modify the exercises based on his or her fitness level and abilities.
- Warm everyone up together and then split them up. They can be paired together, with one doing the exercise while the other spots, and then switch places. Or, following the warm-up, have each client do different exercises. This can be done in circuit fashion or based on each client's individual program.
- Have half the clients do their cardio workout while the others do a short warm-up and then their strength-training workouts. You can alternate days like this, having clients switch which workout they do at each session (either cardio or strength training), or have them switch at the halfway mark during each session.
- If the group is split up during the main portion of the workout, bring everyone back together at the end for stretching and relaxation. This allows for questions and teaching moments, and fosters the group environment.

Group Personal Training Sessions

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Group training isn't limited to the fiscally conservative. Kristi Dowler, co-founder of Bay Area Boot Camp in San Francisco, Calif., says group training is great whether the client needs to jump-start her fitness routine or has become bored with her workout and needs some inspiration. Some clients form their own group with friends and family, while others join a group based on similar goals—including training for a specific event or activity. Most trainers agree that the best candidates are those without special health considerations who also have some basic fitness knowledge.

"Clients who know the general focus of their workouts and only require guidance sparingly are perfect [for group training]," says Darrin Wilson, director of fitness programs at N-Shape Personal Fitness in Raleigh, N.C.

Clients also have to enjoy the social aspect of group training and, as List says, don't mind sharing the spotlight. "This type of training is for anyone who can handle not being the center of attention all the time."

Group Training How-To

There are as many workout options for group training as there are for one-on-one training. The trick is to create workouts that challenge each member of the group, keeping

in mind that there will likely be differing fitness levels. And while the workouts will not be as personalized as one-on-one training, you need to address each client's individual goals.

Goal-setting and the use of many different tools—from foam rollers to BOSU trainers, heart rate monitors to medicine balls—are two of the things that distinguish group training from group exercise classes. It's important that your clients can tell the difference. McMillan

encourages her trainers to inject this level of personalization throughout every class. As an example, she suggests that when beginning an exercise, explain that you chose it because of a specific client's goals. For example: "Hey, Andrea! I've got some leg exercises prepared for today that you're going to love.

They're perfect for your running goals!"

Another way to keep clients' goals in mind is to praise them out loud to the rest of the group. For instance: "Wow, Chuck! You're lifting 40 pounds more on the bench press than you did when you started. Your goal of training three times a week is really paying off!"

Perhaps one of the biggest obstacles a trainer has to overcome, says McMillan, is how to practically manage sessions with a number of different clients. "It takes a very skilled trainer to ensure that a group training session is not totally chaotic with one person twiddling his thumbs while another is getting all the attention. Always be ready. Always know what each client is doing at all times. Always know what's going to be happening next and what equipment you'll need."

Group training also offers a ripe opportunity to educate your clients on various fitness-related topics. McMillan requires her trainers to prepare a teaching focus for each session. One week might be the importance of water, while another week might focus on momentary muscle fatigue. She suggests preparing client handouts and even assigning homework based on the topic.

Choosing From a Variety of Formats

But how, exactly, are group sessions done? "I like doing a cardio/strength work-

Monica Bocks, a trainer and licensed Wellcoach in Truckee, Calif., sets her pay schedule based on how many clients she has scheduled for each group. Overall, clients can expect to save approximately 50 percent off one-on-one training, depending on the size of their group.

- One client: \$60
- Two clients: \$35/client
- Three clients: \$30/client
- Four to five clients: \$25/client



out where two people are on a treadmill or stair machine,” explains Roberts, “and the other two are doing some strength exercise with me supervising. Then they switch places. This works well with two to four people.” Roberts adds that sports conditioning and boot camp-style workouts also work well for group training.

“Our group sessions are geared toward each client’s individual goals,” says Wilson. “The trainer can begin each client on a drill that is customized to their needs, which enables the client to perform exercises to benefit them individually.”

Merz explains that if a group is training for a specific event, she has everyone do the same exercises together, modifying the amount of resistance based on each person’s level. For partners, she says she trains them together, doing the same thing, or as a tag team drill—one doing one exercise, the other performing another exercise and then switching after completion.

How about taking your group clients on a field trip?

Bocks recommends cross-country skiing, hikes or playing golf as great ways to mix up the workouts and instill even more fun and camaraderie into your group sessions.



When Moxley has two clients working out together, she has one do a cardio workout while the other performs strength-training exercises. This allows her to give the client who needs more attention just that. “And in between exercises, I’ll run over and give a few motivational words to the cardio client. [When he’s finished], we’ll do some of the exercises that they have in common or

are easy for them to do together.” She adds that this often includes abdominal work or exercises with bands, balls or tubing.

Bocks gets everyone started with some form of cardio. “I then take them into groups of twos to work out at different parts

of the gym. One client will exercise, one client will spot—this gets them comfortable to perform the exercises on the days that I’m not with them.” At the end of the session, Bocks brings everyone back together for stretching and to answer any questions.

Overall, group training offers many benefits, from greater affordability and motivation for the client to increased income and variety for the trainer. Perhaps best of all, says Dowler, it allows you “to bring fitness to a larger group of people at one time, creating a safe, nurturing, fun and motivating environment that will keep them excited about exercise.” 