

Special Report: **Retention**

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The 'Issue' Is Retention



JEFF BISSONNETTE doesn't have a business background. Instead, he's a personal trainer turned fitness facility owner who has learned a lot about how to operate a fitness business that actually accomplishes what all facility owners strive to do: retain members. Bissonnette and his wife, Teri, own two Anytime Fitness centers, one in Wabasha, Minn., and the other in Lake City, Minn. The difference between these fitness centers and others is that the Bissonnettes have implemented a system that provides personalized workout plans for members each time they come in, providing them not only with personalized attention, but actual results. In return, they've earned loyal members who come to the facility more often to work out — in effect, creating a successful retention program.

The personalized difference

Bissonnette describes the operating procedures of the majority of fitness facilities like this: "Sign up, get an initial workout, then get forgotten about unless you can afford the hundreds of dollars per month that a trainer will cost you. Ask somebody at the front desk [for help], and they will shrug their shoulders; most

of them have no idea how most of the equipment works themselves, let alone [are they] able to give you any worthwhile advice. And, if they did give you some advice, they'd get scolded by the personal training staff, as they would be taking money out of their pockets. This is how our industry has been for 20 or 30 years. The entire focus of the club is [on] getting new members to replace the ones [who] are constantly dropping out."

The emphasis here should be on "majority." Obviously, not all facility owners operate in this manner. Some owners, such as Brandon Flowers and Rick Caputo who own The Dynamic Advantage in Eagle Rock, Calif., and who shared their operating philosophy in *Fitness Management's* February 2008 issue [A New Billing Structure for Personal Training, pp.32-33], recognize this problem. They know that members need help to stick with their exercise program and get results, so their memberships are strictly sold as personal training packages. However, these types of memberships are more expensive than the traditional \$29 to \$49 monthly fees that most facilities charge.

What facility operators need to do is ask themselves: "What are the key components that members want and need in order to stay with my facility?" First, they want to feel like someone knows they are there and cares that they are there. Second, they need to get results from the efforts they are making.

Bissonnette knows this. "Prior to opening Anytime, I knew what was wrong with clubs, but I didn't know how to fix it. When I first opened, I told people, 'You want help? We'll give it to you anytime you want.' At first, it was just the basic exercise programs that we took everyone through." The problem, Bissonnette explains, is that "people want help, but they most often don't ask for it." Why?

Because they either don't know what to ask, they are afraid that what they are going to ask will sound stupid or they don't want to have to pay for the advice.

The turning point for Bissonnette came when, in October 2007, he made a large poster that read, "Increase Your Weights" with an explanation of why it is so important. "Then, someone came up to me and asked, 'When should I increase my weights?'" Bissonnette says. "So, I filled [in her workout card]. And, then, I realized, 'this is it!' So, I started grabbing everyone's workout cards. I just chased after everybody."

The new system that Bissonnette created was originally dubbed the "chart system." In effect, it works like this: Members join the fitness center and get taken through their first workout. When they are finished, they hand in their workout chart. Prior to coming in for their next workout, a trainer fills in their next workout for them. To show members they are getting results, members get their body fat checked every two to three weeks.

The SLED System

What began as the "chart system" has become known as the SLED System. SLED stands for Stronger, Leaner Every Day. Bissonnette created the SLED System based on the Delorme's Principle, which states that in order to develop strength, the training stimulus should consist of high resistance and low repetitions, and it has succeeded in getting excellent results for his members. It's not necessary



Owner Jeff Bissonnette created The SLED System as a retention program that works by giving members results.

The 'solution' is to stop making your members feel invisible by offering them personalized attention, every day, that will give them fitness results.

By Ronale Tucker Rhodes, M.S., Editorial Director

that you use the SLED System; any system that will get your members results will work. But, if you do decide to use it, Bissonnette asks only that he be given credit for it.

To use the SLED System, start by putting a bin on the wall, and print the charts that Bissonnette has created. Then, fill out a workout card for each of your members to use based on the following: The SLED System starts with three sets of 10 repetitions. The idea is that, if members can perform all 10 of the third set, then their weight should be raised for the next workout. A basic rule is that the third set is 100 percent of what a member can perform 10 times, the second set is 75 percent of the third and the first set is 50 percent of the third. Once members perform their workout for the day, they put their chart in the "workout bin" so that it can be filled in for their next workout.

Sample charts can be downloaded from Bissonnette's website at www.sledsystem.com. Charts are available for both strength and cardio workouts, and includes five pages of explanations on how to fill out a chart and how a member might progress from day one. You can also read more about this system (as there is a lot more to it than what is explained here) on the website. Everything on the website is free. "My intentions for giving this program to everybody are entirely altruistic," says Bissonnette. "I only want to improve our industry and help our members.

I would love to see this program spread throughout the country, [so that] all of our membership numbers [are] doubling, our retention [rates are] skyrocketing and our members [are] getting results."

The retention results

You might ask if the retention results are worth the effort. The answer for Bissonnette is yes. While Anytime Fitness is a franchise, Bissonnette says that the franchise is supportive of him, and encourages franchisees to experiment with new programs. The monthly membership charge at his facilities is \$34.95 (a rate the franchisee is free to set), and, after starting the SLED System, he did not raise that rate. According to Bissonnette, it takes only a minute or two to complete a member's chart, and it takes him three hours at the most per day to complete them.

"I have maybe 30 to 50 [charts] in the morning," says Bissonnette, "and, by the end of the day, I'll have done



like 60 to 80 charts.’

Yes, it’s created some extra work for him, but, as Bissonnette explains, “I wanted my members to get better results, and once I saw where this program was going, I realized it was a retention program. By not charging people more, I feel like I’m going to end up with way more members than I have without doing this program.”

Currently, Bissonnette doesn’t have a method of tracking retention rates with his software, which he is changing. But, for now, he has tracked the change in key hits at his door (Anytime Fitness locations are 24-hour, key-accessed facilities). Since implementing the SLED System, he has increased key hits by up to 886 in one month over the previous year’s month, with membership numbers staying roughly the same (about 600, give or take 20 for any time period).

When asked why he thinks the SLED System is working, he says it’s a combination of attention and results. “As owners, we watch our members every day; they come, they go. We



Members have a personalized workout program written up for them on their charts each time they come in to work out.



have no idea if they have questions, if they’d like some help, if they’re getting results or how they are feeling,” Bissonnette says. “A health club [operator] should know their members; they should be more than just bodies on the gym floor. You promised the members results when they joined; if you don’t help them, they will quit and join a different gym.

“All these clubs out there have sales managers; they don’t have anybody that’s a retention manager,” he says. “If you had a great big

club with 10,000 members, and you took two or three trainers and gave them a small salary to do this, and tell those trainers to go out on the gym floor and start chasing people around to help them out, it would give the members a structure. Or, pay them 25 cents or 50 cents a sheet. The idea is that they are going to be a retention specialist.”

The SLED System, says Bissonnette, is one that gets people to think about retention in a different way. “Stop spending so much time with sales and more time with spending time with members. We are the only industry out there that can really make a difference in the obesity epidemic and change people’s lives forever.”

Make retention work

Retention is the No. 1 talked-about issue for the fitness facility industry. Go to any industry trade show, and the retention seminars will be the best-attended. All facility operators want to know what the magical solution is. But, there is no magic. It all comes down to the basics: a facility that upholds its brand; a knowledgeable, caring staff that takes care of its members; and programs and services that deliver what is promised — all of which Bissonnette provides his members, and all of which are discussed in this special report on retention. **FM**



SAMPLE ONLY - YOUR INDIVIDUAL WEIGHTS MAY VARY

S.L.E.D.

| Exercise | Wt or PW | Set 1 | Set 2 | Set 3 | Set 1 | Set 2 | Set 3 | Set 1 | Set 2 | Set 3 | Set 1 | Set 2 | Set 3 | Set 1 | Set 2 | Set 3 |
|-----------------------|--------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Chest Press | Wt | 45 | | | 45 | 75 | 120 | 45 | 75 | 120 | 45 | 75 | 120 | 45 | 75 | 120 |
| | Reps | 12 | | | 12 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 12 | 9 |
| | Progressions | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Leg Curl | Wt | 55 | | | 55 | 65 | 80 | 55 | 65 | 80 | 55 | 65 | 80 | 55 | 65 | 80 |
| | Reps | 12 | | | 12 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 12 | 9 |
| | Progressions | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Chest Press | Wt | 55 | | | 55 | 45 | 55 | 55 | 45 | 55 | 55 | 45 | 55 | 55 | 45 | 55 |
| | Reps | 12 | | | 12 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 12 | 9 |
| | Progressions | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Seated Row | Wt | 60 | | | 60 | 60 | 80 | 60 | 60 | 80 | 60 | 60 | 80 | 60 | 60 | 80 |
| | Reps | 12 | | | 12 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 12 | 9 |
| | Progressions | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Bicep Fly | Wt | 25 | | | 25 | 25 | 40 | 25 | 25 | 40 | 25 | 25 | 40 | 25 | 25 | 40 |
| | Reps | 12 | | | 12 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 12 | 9 |
| | Progressions | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| LB Biceps Curl | PW | 5 | | | 5 | 10 | 15 | 5 | 10 | 15 | 5 | 10 | 15 | 5 | 10 | 15 |
| | Reps | 12 | | | 12 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 12 | 9 |
| | Progressions | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| T1 Pushdown | Cable | 20 | | | 20 | 40 | 50 | 20 | 40 | 50 | 20 | 40 | 50 | 20 | 40 | 50 |
| | Reps | 12 | | | 12 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 12 | 9 |
| | Progressions | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Stability Ball Crunch | Ball | 0 | | | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Reps | 12 | | | 12 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 12 | 9 |
| | Progressions | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Set #1 = Light Set #2 = Medium Set #3 = Difficult

The SLED System uses these charts for both cardio and strength workouts that are based on the Delorme’s Principle.