

07

ESSENTIAL STRATEGIES
FOR ATHLETE
RETENTION.

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OVERVIEW.

We talk to thousands of box owners every year. When we ask what keeps them up at night, they always say the same thing- athlete retention. Across the board, retention is an issue for affiliate gyms everywhere. Even if a box is adding new athletes to their community and building relationships, retaining existing athletes is still a top priority.

One of the main reasons it's so important to retain your athletes is that it costs up to **ten times** more to win a new one than it does to keep a current one. So letting your attrition get out of hand is financially bad for your business, regardless of how many new athletes you add. Plus athletes are more valuable the longer they stay at your box. They refer their family and friends and add value to your community.

As you know, retention takes work. But there are some pretty simple things you can do to build a culture of retention and keep your existing athletes happy. Many of the ideas we share in this guide come from industry leaders and the most successful affiliate gym owners we know. We also back these ideas up with research from top retention experts.

RETENTION STRATEGIES.

You know those businesses that provide such an amazing experience you never think to check out their competitors? Well, our retention strategies will help you provide that kind of experience. Whether these strategies serve as a reminder or new ideas for you, we advise adopting them to keep your athletes happy and coming back.

STRATEGY #01

HAVE GREAT PROGRAMMING AND CONVENIENT CLASSES.

Your athletes will be more likely to keep coming back if they get the programming they want, at a time that's convenient for them. If the time of classes and location of your box aren't convenient, your athletes will be forced to consider other options. Likewise, if your programming isn't comprehensive and well thought out, you'll also lose athletes.

MAKE IT A REALITY

Evaluate Your Programming, Hours and Offerings

From time to time, evaluate your classes and the ability of your athletes to get in and train. Make sure your coaches know the importance of meeting your athletes' needs first, especially in regards to class schedules and programming. Also, make the time it takes for quality programming a priority. When affiliate gym owners and coaches feel uninspired or short of time, it'll be evident in your athletes' reactions to the WODs, and ultimately, their performance.

Conduct bi-annual satisfaction surveys to get candid insight from your athletes. You can use free and easy tools like [Survey Monkey](#) or [SoGo Survey](#) to send questions by email. Email automations through your box management software make this process simple. Or you can use paper surveys and leave them (with a collection box and pens) by your check-in desk. It's also a great idea to set up a general feedback or comment box to solicit suggestions and comments from your athletes.



Backcountry CrossFit, Zen Planner customer since 2012

STRATEGY #02

LET YOUR ATHLETES KNOW YOU APPRECIATE THEM.

You are in the service industry. Just like other service providers, your athletes judge your value based on how you make them feel. This claim isn't speculation. It's a fact. Studies show [that we buy because of emotion, not logic](#). Affiliate gyms that do a great job of making their athletes happy (one of the most powerful emotions) have higher rates of retention than those that don't.

MAKE IT A REALITY

Let Your Athletes Know They Matter

The easiest way to make your athletes feel special is to slow down and listen when they talk to you. This suggestion is incredibly effective. We are drawn to people who are interested in us and make us feel important. So being interested in your athletes helps your retention because it makes them feel important to you and your community.

And while you're actively listening, challenge yourself to remember a fact or two from the conversation. When you next speak to that athlete, ask about that fact(s). For instance, if someone mentions they are training for a competition, ask them about their progress leading up to the event. Then ask them how they performed after the event. Likewise, if an athlete is trying a new nutrition program or supplement, ask how they like it or how you can help support them during it. When you care enough to ask about their life outside the box, your athletes will feel connected and valued.

But don't stop there. Try to find other ways to make your athletes feel special. Recognize their birthdays and anniversaries with your box, and celebrate their accomplishments and personal events. From the birth of a baby to their latest PR, if you can find a reason to celebrate, do it. Something as simple as short congratulations in a newsletter, an automated email, a post on Facebook or an announcement before class is enough to make people feel appreciated.

Also, leave a basket of stamped, branded note cards at your check-in desk. Ask your coaches to send them to athletes whenever they can find a fun reason. Members who get handwritten notes in the mail from your coaches will be happy to know they are cared about. Plus, going out of your way like this will keep your head and shoulders above your competitors.

Train and Motivate Your Team to Give Exceptional Service

We have a few recommendations for training and motivating your team members to deliver great service. Keeping the topic of great service in everyone's mind is at the top of our list. It's easy to forget just how valuable each and every athlete is, especially when stress is high. To combat that, bring service up in team meetings and continually reward team members who deliver great service.

Share your athlete acquisition cost and athlete lifetime value with your team so they can see the importance of retaining athletes. (We'll tell you how to calculate these metrics in the next section) You can also incentivize great customer service by working retention metrics into your coaches' pay or team bonuses. By doing that, you'll make retention a priority for the whole team. And when your team values athlete retention, they will look for ways to improve it.

Part of the retention management process is recognizing the warning signs you often see before an athlete leaves. To take advantage of your team's insight, spend a few minutes of each team meeting talking about athletes who might be in danger of leaving. Your coaches normally know there are concerns long before you do, simply because they work most closely with your athletes.

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MAKE IT A REALITY

Keep Staff Turnover Low

Finally, recognize the correlation between staff turnover and retention. If your affiliate gym has a turnover issue, it will be near impossible to provide great service. Staff turnover causes a whole host of problems that impact service, including canceled classes and a lack of coaching continuity. Understaffing is also a side effect of a turnover issue.

The link between retention and customer service is backed by data. [Dr. Paul Bedford](#), a well-known retention expert, studied the customer service and retention correlation for many years. Dr. Bedford found that each time you- or a team member- interacts positively with an athlete, [they are 20% more likely to visit your gym](#) in the following month. Can you imagine how high your retention would be if athletes had a positive staff interaction every time they stepped foot in your box?



STRATEGY #03

MAKE IT EASY TO BE AN ATHLETE AT YOUR BOX.

Athletes don't want to track you down to pay their membership fees or deal with confusing processes when they are in your box to train. So if it's not easy to be your member, you'll lose them.

MAKE IT A REALITY

Audit Your Processes and Evaluate Your Facility

As affiliate gyms grow and new employees join the team, processes can become complex or inefficient. To keep things simple for your athletes, take the time to do occasional audits by visiting your website and walking through your in-gym athlete experience. Be sure it's easy to see the most updated class schedule and make sure the check-in process is fast and easy.

You can also sell basic retail items, like water, recovery drinks, Paleo snacks, wrist wraps and jump ropes as an added convenience for your athletes.

TO KEEP THINGS SIMPLE FOR YOUR ATHLETES, TAKE THE TIME TO DO OCCASIONAL AUDITS BY VISITING YOUR WEBSITE AND WALKING THROUGH YOUR IN-GYM ATHLETE EXPERIENCE.

Automate Billing and Payments

Most importantly, make sure paying you is effortless. Automating your billing and payment collections saves time and energy for your athletes (and you). Automated payments also help with retention because they take the monthly payment decision point away from your athletes. Otherwise, each month when it's time to pay for their membership, your athletes have to choose to renew for another month. Can you imagine if we had to renew and manually pay for our Netflix membership or phone service each month? That's just insane.

STRATEGY #04

KEEP ATHLETES ENGAGED AND MOTIVATED.

When training is routine, boring and purposeless, people lose interest in it. Once that happens, you've lost them as an athlete. But if training is fun, and athletes are making even the smallest progress towards a goal, it's a lot easier to keep them engaged. It's also easier to show them why they should renew their membership when their contract expires.

MAKE IT A REALITY

Make it Fresh and Interesting

One important element of motivation is variety, so find ways to mix things up and make it fun to be an athlete at your box. Plan [fitness challenges](#) that focus on developing healthy lifestyles, decreasing BMI and incorporating clean eating principles into your athletes' diets. Host workshops to help your athletes work on their weaknesses, such as pull-ups (kipping and butterfly), double-unders, snatches and muscle-ups. Hold outdoor classes when the weather is nice, and add a boot camp or community WODs to your schedule.

Consider adding new classes like barbell-free BodyFit, weightlifting and yoga to your schedule. Keep your eye out for [new fitness trends](#) so you can incorporate them into your programming. When it makes sense financially, look into purchasing new equipment like Assault AirBikes or sleds to offer your athletes more training options. Of course, stay true to your values. We're not suggesting you bring Zumba classes into your box. But if you can incorporate new trends that make sense, your athletes will love the variety.

Make Athletes Set Goals and Track Their Progress

[Set goals](#) with each athlete, and then track their progress to keep them engaged. When you track WODs and an athlete's progress, it shows you care about their success. It also keeps your athletes excited about training. To make the most of the process, meet with each athlete and review their WOD results and goals on a monthly basis. Also, make sure your goal setting and achievement system is continuous. Don't let your athletes set a goal, achieve it and then lose interest in working out.

Because tracking WODs and athlete progress is so important, workout tracking that's integrated in your athlete management software is a must for retention. When a solution also offers a mobile app, it makes it easy for athletes to check the daily WOD, log their results and view the leaderboard and historical data displaying their progress. With a mobile app, they can also reserve classes, see who's coming to class and Comment and Like their fellow athletes' results. Features like this make it fun and easy to be an athlete at your box and can serve as an excellent retention tool.

WHEN YOU TRACK WODS AND AN ATHLETE'S PROGRESS, IT SHOWS YOU CARE ABOUT THEIR SUCCESS. IT ALSO KEEPS YOUR ATHLETES EXCITED ABOUT TRAINING.

STRATEGY #05

BUILD A STRONG AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY.

It seems the more we rely on text and the internet to communicate with one another, the more we want our gyms to provide us with a flourishing and inclusive community. Arguably, functional fitness and high intensity training is one of the best ways to get fit because of the supportive and family-like communities at most boxes. To take advantage of this valuable quality, build a community that makes athletes feel accountable and supportive for one another.

MAKE IT A REALITY

Plant the Seeds

To start, plan fun events to give your athletes a chance to get to know each other better. If you plant the seeds, your more social athletes will step up and help with planning future member-led events. Some popular get-togethers include mud runs, local competitions, happy hours, charity WODs, volunteer projects and group trips to Regionals or the Games. Or you can keep it simple and invite your athletes to eat at a local restaurant after your weekly community WOD. Your athletes will enjoy spending time together, no matter what they're doing.

Try to schedule one event a month, and don't be discouraged if the turnout isn't great at first. Interest will grow as your community grows, and remember that these community-building events are worth their time and effort.

Create an Athlete Hangout Area in Your Gym

As your community builds, your athletes will come in early and linger longer to chat with their friends. If possible, give them a place to hangout and connect. It doesn't need to be a big or fancy area. A couch or one table and a few chairs will work nicely. Just remember, this is where your athletes bump into each other and talk about their WODs. This area is also where they hold each other accountable for attendance and progress, so giving up space and making the expenditure is well worth it.

Use Social Media to Reinforce Community

We normally talk about social media in regards to lead generation, but it's also a great tool for reinforcing the [connections in your community](#). To start, you can create a private Facebook group and invite each of your members as they join your box. Your members can use the private group to discuss WODs, congratulate other athletes on PRs and first-time movements (ex: when an athlete achieves their first pull-up), share clean eating or Paleo recipes, talk about things happening in the bigger community and so much more. As a coach, you can use the group to post information like local competition updates, nutrition tips and inspiring articles and videos to keep your athletes excited about training.

You can also use social media to create official event pages that prompt each athlete to RSVP and post images of your athletes participating in various WODs. Sharing these things on social media will build engagement through athlete comments, likes and shares. Instagram also lets members engage with comments, but doesn't offer a private group option.

Some WOD tracking tools allow users to comment and like their fellow athletes' results on their shared Leaderboard. Although this isn't a traditional form of social media, it's far more powerful as a motivational and community building tool. WOD trackers with social functionality reinforce the spirit of competition and community.

STRATEGY #06

MAKE SURE THEY GET A GOOD START.

As with so many things in life, a good start at your box matters. If first impressions are bad, or a new athlete is too intimidated to jump into your program, the chances are good that you'll lose them.

MAKE IT A REALITY

Think About First Impressions

Athlete retention work starts with someone's first visit, not when they show the warning signs of leaving. Making a great first impression is critical because first impressions set the stage for everything that follows. If a first impression is good, athletes will be less likely to be angry if something goes wrong later. But if an athlete gets off to a bumpy start, they will see issues in a less favorable light.

For example, if a prospect comes into your box and they have to wait a long time to be greeted, they will form a questionable opinion of your customer service. They might even think you don't value new athletes. Then when the restroom is out of hand soap, and you cancel a class because the coach is sick, chances are good they'll be frustrated and move on to the box down the road.

Instead, if you provide a great first impression and it's clear you value athletes, the soap and canceled class is less likely to trigger a negative response.

Prioritize the Onramp Process

Just entering an affiliate gym for the first time can be an intimidating experience. Imagine, as you walk in you hear the music blaring, barbells and plates slamming to the ground and someone loudly grunting as they swing a kettlebell. For a person who's never been exposed to this type of training, it can be intimidating.

If you and your team are sensitive to new athlete nervousness, you can help them overcome fear and become happy long-term members. A [strong foundations program](#) is also critical for the new athletes to transition in safely and easily. Don't be tempted to shortcut the onramp process to make eager new athletes happy, as that often causes injuries and leads to member loss.

Help Them Form the Habit of Exercise

Often you can help a new athlete form the positive habit of working out regularly by giving them the little extra attention we talked about earlier. When a new athlete leaves your box, ask them when they will be back. They will be far more likely to show up for the next class if they give you a verbal affirmative. If they leave with just a vague "see you later," it's easier for them not to come back, or at least not right away. So make sure you get that verbal commitment before they leave your box.



Front Range CrossFit, Zen Planner customer since 2012

STRATEGY #07

KNOW YOUR NUMBERS.

Your business metrics tell you a lot about your athletes' happiness and your overall rate of retention. Metrics analysis identifies trends, highlights trouble and lets you intelligently address issues as they arise. Besides, you can't manage what you can't measure. So knowing and using your retention metrics to make decisions is a critical part of retaining your athletes.

MAKE IT A REALITY

Bookmark These Metrics and Monitor Them Frequently

To set you up to effectively use metrics for retention management, we'll first cover some definitions:

- **Members Initial (MI):**
The number of members at the initial or beginning of any period.
- **Members End (ME):**
The number of members at the end of a period.
- **Gross New Members (GNM):**
The total of all new members for a specific period, regardless of losses over the same period.
- **Gross Members Lost (GML):**
The total of all member losses for a specific period, regardless of gains over the same period.

Now that you understand some of the basic member variables, you can start doing some calculations and analysis.

1. Net New Members (NNM):

The difference between members gained and members lost for a specific period. A positive number indicates your business is growing, and you can expect increasing revenue.

$$[\text{NNM} = \text{GNM} - \text{GML}]$$

2. Churn or Attrition Rate (CR):

Represents the rate of member turnover. To calculate your member churn rate, select a specific period and divide your Gross Members Lost during the period by the number of members at the beginning of the period. Then multiply by 100 for your percent that represents your member churn.

$$[\text{CR} = (\text{GML}/\text{MI}) \times 100]$$

Churn rate is expressed as a percentage. A high churn rate indicates your members are unhappy with their results, service or some other aspect of the gym or their membership. Looking at monthly churn rates compared to previous months can help you identify trends. Fitness businesses see seasonal variations in churn, so it is often helpful to compare a specific month, season or period with the same period from previous years.

If you want to look at churn year over year, use this formula to find your annualized churn.

MAKE IT A REALITY

1. Annualized Churn (AC):

Monthly churn rate expressed annually.

$$[AC = \{ (GML / [(MI + ME) / 2] \times 12) \times 100]$$

If your churn rate isn't where you want it to be, we suggest methodically implementing the suggestions in this guide.

2. Member Retention Rate (R):

The percent of your members who continued their monthly membership.

$$[R = ((ME - GNM) / MI) \times 100]$$

Unlike Churn Rate, you want a high Member Retention Rate. (They both tell the same story but look at it from a different angle.) High retention is an indicator that your gym is performing well, and your members are happy with your services.

3. Cost of Acquisition (CAC):

The cost to gain one new member. To calculate your cost of acquisition, select a specific period and divide the total marketing/advertising costs by the total new members gained over the same period.

$$[CAC = \text{total marketing costs} / GNM]$$

As we mentioned earlier, it costs more to replace a member than it does to keep a member. For that reason, we're highlighting the cost of acquisition here.

4. Attendance Per Athlete:

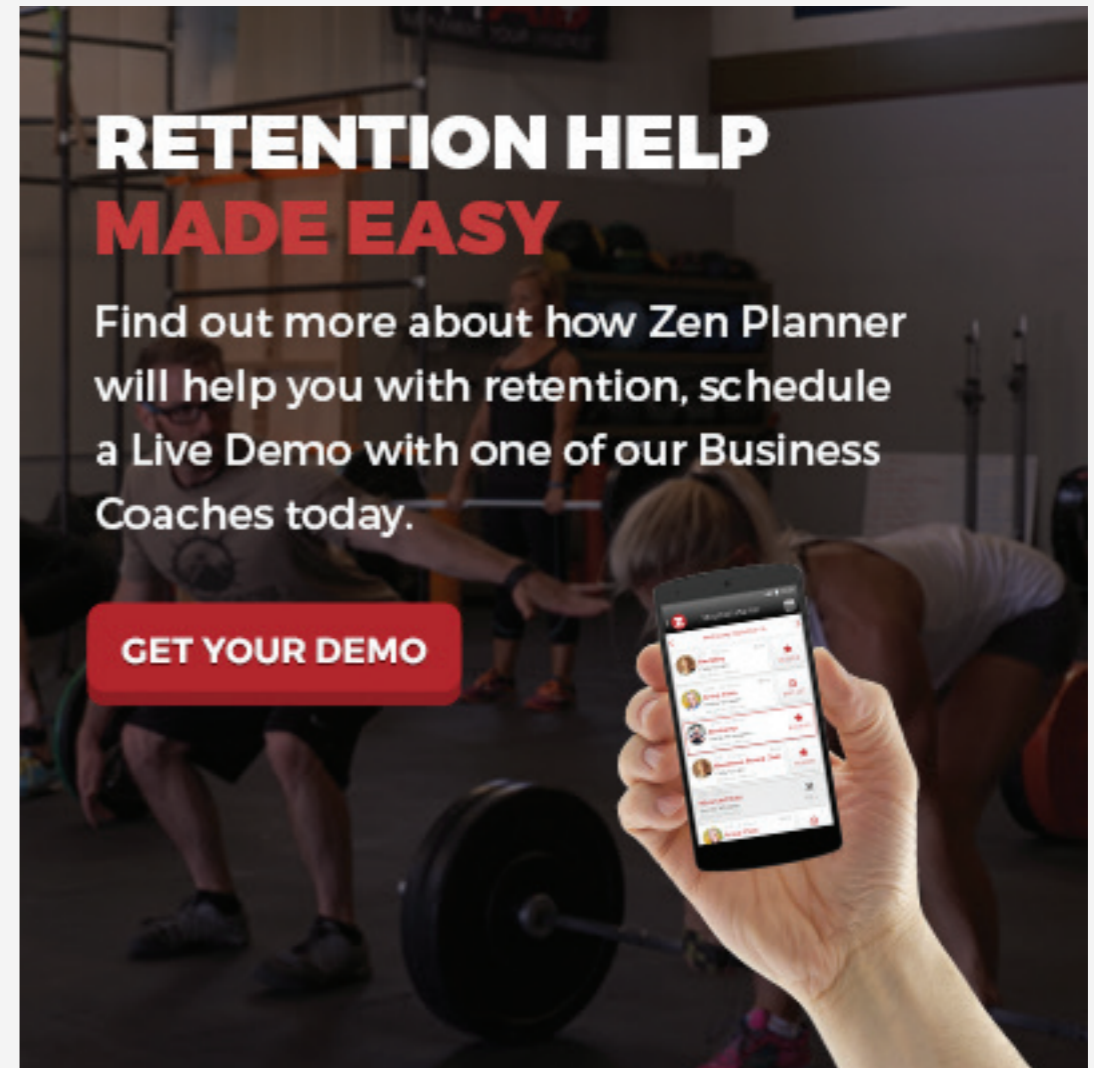
This is simply an evaluation of the number of classes or visits your member has per period of time (weekly is standard). Analyzing attendance per member over time allows you to establish your own unique standard. For example, you may consistently see a high rate of three or more classes per member per week. If that number falls to two for several consecutive weeks, you'll want to figure out why.

When it comes to staying on top of your retention metrics, member management software is invaluable. It makes WOD and attendance tracking, as well as metric reporting, effortless. Without member management software, it's likely your metrics won't be accurate, and tracking everything will be near impossible as you begin to grow your business.

SUMMARY.

Retention is a critical concern for affiliate gym owners. Keeping existing athletes while bringing in new ones often feels like a never-ending battle. The good news is that the struggle doesn't need to be fought without a strategy. By being proactive and building a culture of retention, you can make sure your athletes are happy and getting what they need. By knowing your retention metrics, you can continuously monitor your overall retention trends and address any issues if they arise.

Member management software plays a key role in retention. Automated billing makes being a member easy, and WOD tracking keeps athletes engaged and coming back. Email automations help you stay in contact with your athletes so you can wish them a happy birthday, remind them that their credit card is about to expire or tell them that you miss seeing them around the box. If you want to find out more about how Zen Planner will help you with retention, schedule a live demo with one of our Business Coaches today.



**RETENTION HELP
MADE EASY**

Find out more about how Zen Planner will help you with retention, schedule a Live Demo with one of our Business Coaches today.

GET YOUR DEMO

ABOUT ZEN PLANNER

ZEN PLANNER HAS BEEN THE EXPERT SOLUTION FOR BOX OWNERS SINCE 2006. LIKE YOU, OUR TEAM OF CERTIFIED COACHES AND ATHLETES IS PASSIONATE ABOUT THE SPORT; IT'S WHAT WE DO BEST.

Our comprehensive box management solution gives you the vital business tools you need to take your box to the next level, enabling you to share your passion and grow your community. With integrated payment processing, Advanced Workout Tracking, engaging athlete self-service features including a Member Mobile App and Kiosk iPad App, automations, in-depth reporting and much more, you have everything required to grow the community you've put your blood, sweat and tears into building. Our solution is fully customizable, allowing you to build it out to meet the unique needs of your culture.

Zen Planner is remarkably easy to use and we're here for you, every step of the way. From the start, our Software Pros will ensure our solution is the right fit for your box. Once you join our community, you'll receive free coaching sessions with a member of our Onboarding team to help you master the solution. Our Customer Success team, with a satisfaction rating of 98%, is available at no additional cost by phone and email to help you with any questions you may have along the way.

**TO LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR FAMILY, CULTURE AND VALUES,
CHECK OUT OUR POST:**

[OHANA: Making the Difference through Strong Values.](#)