

Summer Camps Improve Retention and Your Bottom Line

Improve retention and boost your gross sales with day and summer camps. They are increasingly popular with parents, especially since many school districts nationwide have added more no-school days to their calendars, causing even more scheduling conflicts for working parents. Offering and operating martial arts day and summer camps require planning, management and much of your time and energy, but they are also learning experiences for both students and instructors, and a profitable experience for you.

I recommend the following 10 steps to plan and operate exciting, energized days camps as well as an entire summer of all-day fun and activities. I have divided these steps into three stages (Pre-Planning, Planning and Execution) to make it easier to organize and manage your camp program.

Pre-Planning

Step 1: Schedules and Sales Goals

- Determine the date(s) of your camp – A quick call to your local school district or a visit to their Website should provide you with a list of the no-school days for the year.
- Determine the hours of your camp – Parents will appreciate a camp that is open early enough to accept their children before parents must be at work. Don't be surprised if your camp must be open from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.
- Determine your fee structure and sales goal – If you have an after-school program, then you know how much to charge for a full day. If not, then call some local day care centers for their fees so you have a realistic yardstick to determine your charges. Supplies and admissions might add some additional costs to this number, but determine early in your planning the baseline net you want to realize from each student.

Step 2: Develop Your Theme

Any day or summer camp program begins with a theme that generates excitement and maintains a high level of interest. Consider themes that relate to a field trip to a local museum or a workshop that introduces your students to new martial arts.

You and your staff's hobbies and interests are great sources of theme ideas. You can even involve your students and ask them for suggestions. One of my best camps was based on my wife's interest in dance. Both students and instructors spent a rainy November day learning and practicing various types of dance, from swing to capoeira. By the end of the day, everyone was tired, but smiling.

Step 3: Research

- Make a list of all the information and tasks that are required to prepare for your camp program. Start filling the blanks once you've completed your list. You'll discover that your list will change (additions, deletions, etc.), but don't wait for the perfect list; create a good beginning list and start moving forward.
- Information you may need includes:
 - Hours and admission price for field-trip visits.
 - Costs for various events you may choose to include in your camp program.
 - Details about special classes during your camp.
- If your school is typical, then among your students and their families and friends are likely to be sources of some of the information you need—and great ideas and volunteer time that you want too. Some of them will be able to help you find and access interesting places and events to visit and provide "expert" advice on various topics.

BLACK BELT **MANAGEMENT**

MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR THE OWNER AND INSTRUCTOR

Step 4: Involve Your Staff

When you've developed your camp program to this point, then it's time to involve your staff.

- **Schedule/Staffing** — Staff members of many schools have daytime jobs and are unable to assist during a camp program. Survey your staff to determine who is available for your camp. Even if some of your staff is unavailable during the day, then ask them to assume extra evening duties and relieve you after a long and busy day.
- **Special Help** — Make sure to ask your staff if any of them have any special skills that would support or enhance your camp's theme. Some may also have camp experience and will be able to help you manage the program.
- **Ideas** — Ask your staff for ideas to make your camp more fun, challenging and interesting.

Planning

Step 5: Promote Your Camp Program

Although there is still work to do, it's time to start to promote your program. Many parents make summer camp decisions months before the end of the school year, so you can't really start to promote your camp too early. The following audiences are the typical targets for the promotion of a camp program. You may have others, so think carefully about the many types of audiences and groups that are likely prospects for your camp.

- **Current students** — One of the basic tenets of marketing is that your best source for new business is your current customers.
 - Create a mailing list of your entire student body. (You should already have one!)
 - Create an invitation or flyer and mail one to the entire list.
 - Post flyers in high-traffic areas of your school.
 - Announce your camp program in every class for a number of weeks.
 - NAPMA has provided you with many ideas to announce a special event, such as your camp,

that generates real excitement and interest. Use every one of those ideas.

- **Parents** — It's always a good idea to communicate with the audience that actually pays your camp fees.
 - Generally, parents see what you send or give to their children, your students, but should also consider creating a "parents" letter or flyer with a message directed specifically to them.
 - Involve parents in your camp program, especially those that are home during the day.
- **Students' Friends** — Day camps often generate excellent prospects.
 - Schedule "Bring-A-Buddy Days" to attract students' friends who are not participating in any organized summer programs.
- **Former Students and other Prospects** — Create and send specially worded invitations to former students and all other prospects whose names you acquired from various sources. All it takes is two or three qualified responses from every hundred you mail to generate a hefty return on your investment in some paper, envelopes and stamps.

Step 6: Create a Camp Schedule

- Create a camp schedule that doesn't interrupt any normal daytime classes. By the time you complete this step, you will have realized that there is very little difference between operating a camp and a class. Undoubtedly, your classroom experiences have taught you that the better you plan, the better your class (or camp), so take the time to determine every detail. You'll have a successful camp and a very satisfied feeling.
- Understand the rhythm of a day camp. Early morning is mellow as you wait for everyone to arrive and focus on scheduled activities. Midmorning is a great time for high-energy fun. Conversely, mid-afternoon is most students' low-energy period. Schedule a quiet rest break for everyone, including you. As your facility makes the transition from day camp to evening classes, don't abandon any campers still onsite. Part of your planning should include a specific place for them to wait for parents or activities to keep them occupied.

BLACK BELT **MANAGEMENT**

MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR THE OWNER AND INSTRUCTOR

- If you've taught children, then you know their attention spans are short and shrinking. Try to avoid scheduling or running any activity for more than an hour, unless the activity is out of the ordinary or everyone is having too much fun to stop. Schedule several rest periods or free time breaks during the day, but never more than an half hour.

Step 7: Confirmations

You've made your plans and created a detailed schedule. Take some time to confirm the participation and schedule of your instructors, parent volunteers and any parks, museums or other locations you plan to visit. Be absolutely sure that any field trip destinations are open, expect you on the date and at the time specified and are prepared for a group of your size.

Confirmations, and even re-confirmations, will save you time and real dollars, reduce your stress and elevate everyone's interest, excitement and fun.

Step 8: List and Gather Supplies

Make a list of any special equipment or supplies you'll need for your camp. Snacks, award certificates, art and craft supplies and a rental video are typical.

This is also a good time to coordinate any sales opportunities with your camp program, such as new gear students will need to participate in your sparring camp, for example. Better yet, sell everyone a set of boffer weapons and focus on weapon sparring.

Execution

Step 9: Meet With Your Staff

Prepare your staff at least a week before your camp opens. Finalize staffing arrangements, including those who will be on duty during your lunch break and after you leave. Walk your entire staff and volunteers through the schedule so they already have the answers to the questions students and parents will ask.

Invite and accept any camp program ideas or improvements from your staff. Often, a subtle change or addition will generate great benefits. Just be sure their ideas will provide real value and not cause unnecessary complications.

9.5: Sleep Eight Hours Every Night

Your camp schedule will require you to be an early riser and probably expend more energy than normal. Be sure to sleep seven to eight hours every night, as any physician would recommend. Keep in mind that the better you perform steps one through nine, the more likely you'll perform this step well. Sweet dreams of a successful camp!

Step 10. Let's Go Camping!

You planned well. Your staff and facilities are prepared and they know the program and their tasks. It's time to open your camp and enjoy the feeling of a well-managed operation and the opportunity for closer interaction with your students.

Focus your energy and divide the workload accordingly, because you'll never be able to operate your camp and attend to your daytime tasks simultaneously. Managing two major tasks at once means doing neither well. If you've planned your camp correctly and thoroughly and recruited enough staff and volunteers to help, then you're able to focus on a fun and exciting camp that leaves everyone, yourself included, happy and enthused about your programs.