

Boost Your Post-Graduation Profits With Free and Paid Events

Creating interest in your program and generating revenues between the December holidays and August Back-to-School can be a challenging time for school owners, particularly in trying economic times. Graduation fees, pro shop sales and creative school events, such as parents' night out or summer camps, can provide a nice boost to your revenues.

Repeatedly asking your students to pay for dojo-related events, however, can have a negative effect. Students don't want to think that their sensei only cares about extracting more money from them. Scheduling free events between paid ones can make your students feel appreciated, while still serving your ultimate purpose of making more money. Two of my favorites are "Spar Wars" and a talent show.

Spar Wars is a fantastic paid event that serves several purposes.

- First, it's a great way for your students to sharpen their skills. Training for and competing in a school tournament can provide that extra competitive boost, while maintaining a friendly atmosphere, so your novice students won't feel as intimidated about competing.
- It serves as motivation for students to come to class and train hard, even after rank testing is done.
- It makes parents and spectators think your school is more than just smoke and mirrors.
- It creates a buzz and an energy that is palpable during the days before the event.
- **IT GENERATES REVENUE!**

You should begin talking about your Spar Wars event just before graduation, or eight weeks before the actual event. Explain to your students that just because they've completed their testing, they can't stop coming to class (this is especially helpful if summertime is approaching) because they'll have to prepare for Spar Wars. Creating that initial buzz is critical, even before they can register for the event.

- Next, choose the competitive events at your Spar Wars.
- At my school, students can enter three events:
 - Free Sparring (This can be point-sparring, depending on your style).
 - Steer the Bus (A sumo/wrestling contest).
 - Foam weapons.

Several competitive events serve many purposes.

- Multiple events makes Spar Wars seem that much grander, similar to your school's Olympics.
- Some students may be better at one competition than another. This gives everyone an opportunity to excel.
- Beginning students, who may not be ready for free sparring, can still participate, and generate revenue for you.
- Three revenue streams are better than one!

Next, organize your divisions. I place students in lightweight and heavyweight divisions because our juniors encompass such a wide range of body types. Remember, the goal is to include everyone.

Once you've chosen your events and organized your divisions, order your trophies and medals. We award both because I want every child who takes part to receive a medal, while the winner of each event is awarded a trophy. This also further justifies charging for the event. The student with the overall best showing in all three events receives a special award. It's a martial arts belt, usually dark blue, with the words "SPAR WARS" embroidered on it. The previous all-event champion is allowed to wear his or her belt during the next Spar Wars.

This format is a great motivator for the lower ranks to continue to advance. Because only high ranks can participate in free sparring, only they can enter all three events. This means only high ranks have an

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opportunity to win the overall Spar Wars title. If a student wants to be the champ, then he or she must continue to train and improve.

Pricing for the event is your decision. A fair amount \$10 to \$35, depending on the socio-economic level of your student body. I suggest that you charge this amount PER EVENT. You can offer a discount to those who enter all three events, siblings or family members.

After you complete these initial plans, create a flyer that includes the date, time and price of your Spar Wars. Be sure to announce on your flyer that friends and family members are invited to watch the competition. Nothing excites spectators like competition, and prospects will salivate once they are in the middle of all that action. Distribute the flyer to your students, parents and walk-ins. Print a number of them at poster size and display them throughout your school. I like to include the line, "Who Will Win The Belt?" on our poster. It's the ultimate prize, so remind your students that if they want to win it, then they must stick with the program.

As soon as the trophies, medals and championship belt arrive, display them prominently at your front desk. Nothing excites kids like a shiny prize they could potentially win. Suddenly, someone who was on the fence about paying the entry fee is begging their parents for an opportunity to win three trophies and a belt.

Once you've completed the steps above, it's time to promote the buffer or free event. At our school, it is a talent show. It is usually a good idea to wait until you start to promote your Spar Wars (a minimum of a month before the event) before you announce the free event.

You can tell your students, "I know we'll all be training hard during the next few weeks for Spar Wars, but we can all have fun at our big talent show a couple of weeks after Spar Wars, and I want everyone to participate."

I had one child ask, "Do we have to pay?"

I responded, "Of course not. The talent show is to celebrate my birthday, so you will be performing for me and our guests."

I've chosen to combine the talent show with the commemoration my birthday because I enjoy seeing

the kids perform. We celebrate the birthday of one of our school's head instructors as another paid event during the year.

Create a colorful, fun flyer and signs, announcing the free event, next to your poster that is promoting your paid event. The word "FREE" should be very visible on the flyer and poster. Inviting potential prospects is also key, so include a message, such as "Invite all your friends to see you strut your stuff," on all promotional materials. It's also a good idea to mention free food, such as pizza. All parents will appreciate a break from preparing dinner.

Students can sing, dance, act or perform any talent they choose. You should pre-approve their performances to ensure they are appropriate. Set a time limit of two to three minutes per performance, so the event moves.

Showcase your demo team during your talent show. If prospects attend the event, then you want to present the best your school has to offer and show parents and kids that your school offers fun, free activities, but also teaches serious martial arts. Your demo team can open the show, and perform a different routine two or three times during event. Create a group skit that combines everyone's talents: acting, singing, gymnastics and martial arts. This will build camaraderie and can serve as a grand finale.

Schedule rehearsal time for group routines. Devote one or two classes per week to rehearse or any downtime between classes. While your students should direct their performances, an instructor should carefully choreograph and direct the demo team's rehearsal and performance. It's imperative that your demo team performance be sharp and tight. Your audience will expect martial arts, as performed by your demo team, to be your students' number one talent.

While you may choose to schedule your Spar Wars and talent show on days without regular classes, I prefer using class times for events. I'll choose the day with the longest break between kids and adult classes; for us that's Wednesday. I may also pick the day with the first and smallest adult class and cancel that class to give me more time for the event. There are several beneficial reasons:

- I value my student's and my time. We all have lives outside of martial arts, and I don't like asking my

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students to give me more of their time than they've already committed, and vice versa.

- Regular class times are abuzz with students, parents and visitors, not to mention accidental traffic or the hustle and bustle outside the school. If an event is occurring, then I want the most people to know about it, even if they just stumble on it by accident.
- Scheduling the event during a regular class breaks the monotony of practice. Though, I always try to keep our classes exciting and fun, when you have some kids who train practically every day, the routine may become boring. The event feels like a break from everyday activities.

Students should be able to register for your paid event (Spar Wars) until the day before. You don't want to lose any last-minute revenue. During the weeks before the event, make sure you have all the equipment you'll need and any additional awards. I like to have a special sportsmanship award or trophy available for anyone the exhibits an exceptional martial arts spirit.

You may want to reorganize your pro shop, prominently displaying items used in the event, or updated versions of them, to generate additional revenues from motivated students and those attending your events. Fully stock your refreshments in preparation for the extra traffic.

During the morning of the event, create tournament brackets with all the names of those who have registered. Safety should be your paramount concern, so pair students of equal ability. Remove the flyers, posters and signs with prices and dates, and display banners with the title, "SPAR WARS." Your "FREE" event sign should be displayed below the Spar Wars banner. Create a written schedule of events that includes an introduction, all events and awards presentation to ensure your event runs smoothly.

During your introduction to the audience, mention the free event (talent show), thank everyone for coming and explain why it's important for students to compete together, have fun and create a family atmosphere at the school. Make them feel that every dollar and minute they spend at your school is in support of their extended home and family.

Make every contest a big deal to keep the participants and spectators excited and enthusiastic. The losers should receive just as much praise, as the winners; and

the presentation of the awards should be a mini-event. During your closing, invite everyone to bring his or her friends to your super exciting FREE talent show. Remind them of the date and time.

Once you've had a successful paid event (Spar Wars), you're ready to benefit from a free, lead-generating event in a couple of weeks, which will excite everyone for your next paid event, perhaps, graduation, a month later. Not only will you generate several hundred dollars in extra revenue, but also you should be able to enroll excited prospects that want to be part of a school that hosts these great events, and entice your beginners to upgrade.