

# Case Study

## Growing Through Retention - Esprit

Retention in gymnastics can be a subject which splits coaches and club managers. If you don't mind gymnasts leaving, as there are always a new group of 5 year olds with lots of potential trying to join your club, then that's fine. Esprit Gymnastics Club in Swindon however has shown how retaining gymnasts has improved the whole club, improved performance levels and stopped a gradual decline that would have eventually seen the club and performance levels fail.

If you retain gymnasts they can help with some of the following:

- To help you eventually fund your own facility
- Get more space, time in your existing training environment
- Support (subsidise) your elite programme
- Pay for coaching courses
- Pay your coaches for their time
- Pay yourself, so you can spend more time doing what you love without the need to hold down a separate job as well as trying to coach
- Buy new equipment
- Get funding for one of the above
- Or just grow what you have so you can pay all the bills

### **So, how did Esprit do it?**

Esprit started like most clubs, in a school hall with about 50 members. It grew to around 150 over a year or so by sending leaflets to schools and having competition success printed in the local paper. After a lot of hassle with the Council and planning permission, they took over an industrial unit and quickly grew to around 300 members. They didn't even have to work at getting members, they just came! This membership generated enough to pay the rent and utilities but there wasn't much left to pay coaches, buy new equipment and afford to pay for the rest of the clubs' extras.

In the 6 years they were there, they had, on average, 300-350 new members join Esprit every year. So they should have had hundreds more members (and money) than they actually did. But they actually had a fall out rate of more than 100%. This meant they were losing a lot of potential income and talent. If they were going to pay for a 'proper gym', they identified they needed to change... quickly!

Every club circumstance is different however this example is true in lots of clubs across the UK. Esprit started measuring the drop out of their members and this allowed them to look at their role as a club and also to establish whether they were improving or in fact declining.

Esprit started, not by asking people that left why they left, as there were too many of them! They asked their existing parents why they stayed and it quickly became clear, it was 'in spite' of the lack of customer service. The reason they stayed was because their children loved the sport and/or were high achievers. Esprit found that when parents see their children achieving, they will often put up with a lot. There were many reasons why people left but few were connected with what happened in the gym, it was always what happened or didn't happen outside with the parents.

Esprit's case shows that 2,000 children were lost to the sport in only 6 years - from only one club!

### **Esprit's key motivator was...**

You only ever get ONE chance to make a great first impression. Esprit established a club development plan that would generate revenue and in turn sustain the club over the long term. This means the club runs exactly like a business... they just don't tell the coaches they do!

### **Positioning**

As part of this development plan, the club needed to work out what Esprit stood for. If they didn't know why they were there, why they did what they did, how could they expect their parents to?

Their philosophy was to help children at any level, be the best that they could be. From the lowest to highest achiever, it shouldn't matter, they should all be in appropriate classes to suit their potential and then helped to exceed their own expectations. That simply is what they already did, they just hadn't told anyone before! They also realised, parents simply want their children to achieve things, they want their children to grow up to be nice people - they want them to be champion children not champion gymnasts... Champion Children!

Esprit should therefore be a place where EVERY child feels like a champion. That's why they came up with...

## **Esprit Gymnastics, where EVERY child is a champion!**

### **Customer Service**

Everything the club then did was based on this simple philosophy and was used on all the leaflets, website, advertising, signs etc. All of which was consistent in its look and its content. Esprit identified parents as being the main customer (keep the parents happy and they'll keep bringing their kids!). They then decorated the parents waiting area and called it a 'parent's lounge', put in chairs, sofa's, vending machines, free Wi-Fi and TV's linked via CCTV to the gyms. That way all parents could watch their gymnasts training, have time to themselves to read, surf the internet, work or just chat with other parents. Esprit was now a much more enjoyable place to be - for everyone.

Retention levels went up.

Next they looked how people told them they felt about them, the things they got wrong and how they treated their parents, so:

- They ensured there was a coach available at the end of every class to talk to parents
- They made sure their office was manned, all the time
- They started training all the coaches and staff about how to treat people and give great customer service
- They made all staff wear simple, cheap Esprit uniforms - Pink Esprit polo shirt and black leggings

- They produced information leaflets guiding parents, as simply as possible through the complex sport that is gymnastics and more importantly how they taught the sport
- They erected a birthday board, where every gymnast who has a birthday that week has their name up on the board
- They put up a notice board where gymnasts could post pictures, notes to coaches etc.
- They introduced a parent suggestion/feedback form
- They tidied up!

Cost of the above = nothing.

### **Branding**

Esprit looked at their branding from a parents' point of view. The feeling the parents get when they walk into the gym is so important. The greeting they receive, what facilities are in place while they are waiting and the area where they wait for their children.

### **Showing they care**

Showing they care was the second most important thing Esprit did. The introduction of simple postcards, given to every child at least once a term, is one of the very best ways they found of improving retention rates. They send them to gymnasts for any improvements in effort, new move achieved, fears conquered, if they are ill etc.

They also send them to parents. If parents complain, Esprit thanks them and then act on their complaint. If they make a suggestion the club thanks them and tell them what they are doing about it. They send postcards to parents for birthdays, weddings, special occasions, anything possible to keep in touch with their members. Postcards are sent to members by post not by email, Facebook, twitter or just giving it to them. Receiving something in the mail is unusual and different for a child, it's something someone has taken the trouble to do, just for them, they recognise that fact and it means so much more.

### **Information transfer**

Esprit selected some parents as spokespeople and started to give them lots of information. They now take the time to ask them questions. The spokespeople do a great job for the club. They pass on information and tell everyone how great the club is.

Esprit also produced a range of leaflets explaining every step of their programme, from pre-school to elite. They explain in simple terms what the club does and why the club has a certain rule or policy.

**In summary this is what Esprit did to retain gymnasts by improving their customer service:**

- 1. Worked out their philosophy, then let EVERYONE know what it was**
- 2. Painted the walls, cleaned the curtains and made sure the staff had clean smart uniforms, then kept the place clean & tidy**
- 3. Encouraged their parents to be part of the club as well as their child**
- 4. Talked to parents to get them 'on-side'**
- 5. Sent postcards and made them personal, specific and special**
- 6. Gave parents more information than they could handle**
- 7. Answered the phone.**
- 8. Had someone greeting parents.**
- 9. Smiled**

In one year Esprit grew from a club of 300 to a club of more than 750 and have more than tripled their income. It was all done by retaining the gymnasts they had.

The reason the few simple changes at Esprit worked was due to the fact that the club had the desire to change, adapt to the needs of its customers and ignored anyone who came up with the age old – ‘gymnastics is different’ argument.

Check out these reference sites for brilliant information on retaining gymnasts and running a great gymnastics club.

**<http://www.tumblebear.com>**

**<http://gymnasticszone.com/?s=retention>**

**<https://metzgerbootcamp.com/jeff.htm>**

**<http://www.kidsfirstsports.com/>**