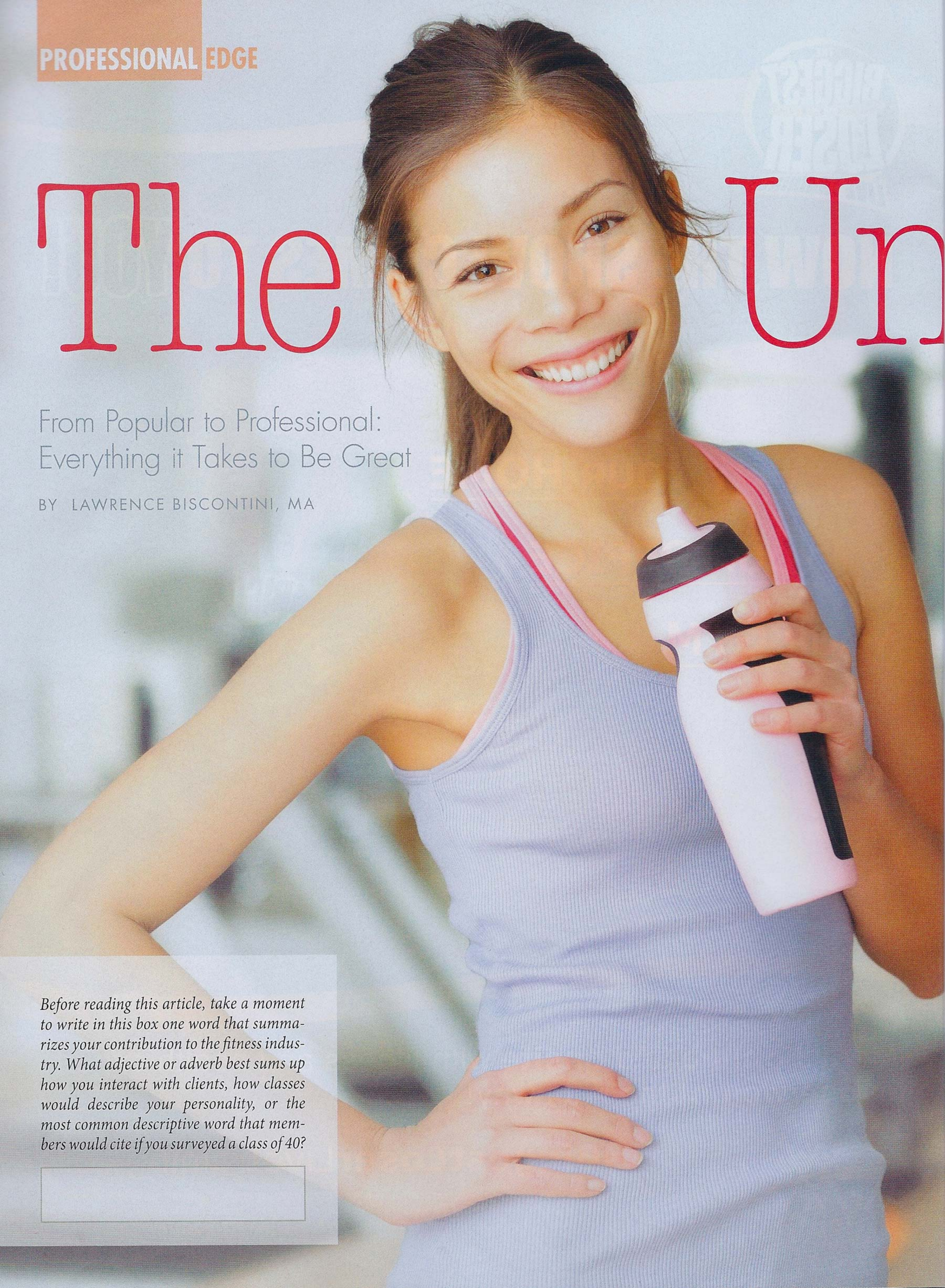


The Un

From Popular to Professional:
Everything it Takes to Be Great

BY LAWRENCE BISCONTINI, MA

Before reading this article, take a moment to write in this box one word that summarizes your contribution to the fitness industry. What adjective or adverb best sums up how you interact with clients, how classes would describe your personality, or the most common descriptive word that members would cite if you surveyed a class of 40?



touchables

From personal trainers to group fitness instructors, the goal of many fitness professionals is to be *popular* and fill classes to the brim. To be sure, such a goal proves smart, for no group fitness managers want to pay prime time instructors top dollar amounts to instruct classes with only five people. Still other fitness instructors strive to be as *professional* as possible, certifying themselves from CPR to group fitness, with even further ongoing, specialty certifications. In light of the changing nature of the legalities of the fitness industry, group fitness managers need to hire currently certified instructors as professional role models.

These two industry-standard “P” words of fitness, then, “Popular” and “Professional,” serve as goals for all of today’s group fitness instructors. Consider the word written in the box at the start of this article. Is the word more about being “Popular” or “Professional”? Either response is valid, but it may tell each person answering something interesting about himself or herself in light of these two “P” words. The chosen word reveals where strengths lie. When nobody can point a finger at a fitness professional and cite a valid area for improvement in either of these two arenas, this professional is untouchable. And to an exploration of being professionally untouchable—by being both popular and professional—we now turn.

Take two extremes. First, consider an instructor with a large social media following who teaches packed classes but who, unfortunately, introduces static stretching in the warm-up and several contraindicated exercises during class. Because of his lapsed certification, he does not know that the protocols for flexibility in the warm-up changed recently. He is quite popular, but not professional. Second, the other extreme is the instructor or trainer who, while possessing every form of valid certification as well as specialty certificates, cannot grow a client base or attract more than five people at a time to her class, since she’s unable to create a compelling experience. She is quite professional, but not popular.

“I need instructors who are popular and professional,” says Deborah Puskarich, Group Exercise & Intern Director for the Cooper Fitness Center™ at Craig Ranch in Dallas, “because in terms of popularity, I need to fill a room and make my cost per head effective economically. I’d rather pay one instructor \$60 with a class full of 30 participants, making my cost per head only \$2.00, than have just one member running on a ten-thousand dollar treadmill.” C. Mark Rees, Group Fitness Department Head for Life Time, Chicago, agrees, adding that “because I manage a large-chain fitness facility, I have a countrywide reputation to uphold, making it imperative only to hire

and use those instructors who maintain themselves as professionally as possible, both on paper and on property. They have to be credentialed, and they have to pack the room.”

Popular

Popular instructors deliver measured, realistic and achievable benefits in their classes. Jay Guillory, AFAA Master Specialist based in Houston, says that the most popular instructors are those who make every attempt to “de-elevate” themselves off of the pedestal. “When members realize how normal we really are,” he explains, “they are a lot more open to asking questions, which in turn allows me to be of service to them.”

Popular instructors bring more to the party than mediocre ones. In addition to delivering a consistent, challenging-but-doable product, popular instructors also bring V.A.S., or “Value Added Service.” Value Added Service means going above and beyond the mere call of duty, and popularity quickly increases with it. Deirdra Martinez, Zumba® Fitness Instructor based in Los Angeles, develops relationships with companies such as local supermarkets and farmer’s markets, asking for coupons, which she distributes in her classes. “Members love getting discounts on things like shopping that they have to do anyway,” she says, “and the businesses I go to couldn’t pay for advertising like I give them!” People

get more than a workout with Martinez; they get an experience with added bonus that transcends the confines of their gym membership.

Other instructors get their participants to do the talking for them, and word of mouth travels honestly and quickly in terms of boosting popularity. Noel Chelliah, outdoor boot camp instructor and owner of the Body Transformation Camp in Malaysia, records quick bits of his clients' most moving testimonials immediately after classes when they are endorphin-rich and drenched in sweat, and shows those on his Facebook page, generating dozens of instant "comments" and "likes."

Popular instructors such as Stephen Bel Davies use team teaching to increase popularity. "I both take the classes of others—who invite me to teach snippets of class, and invite other instructors to take my class—incorporating them as well. I think team teaching can be invaluable because, not only does it boost popularity by bringing the excitement of something new to class, but it lets instructors learn from their peers."

A common thread among popular instructors is the ability to maintain a balance between offering a predictable format and offering changes that bring participants new viewpoints, perspectives and benefits.

Professional

Professional instructors are credentialed role models in the industry. They adhere to the AFAA Code of Ethics, and keep both CPR and other certifications current. Regardless of popularity, professional instructors working under the larger umbrella of a fitness facility never threaten to take their participants with them should they leave. However, this is not all.

Guillory believes that dressing the part is crucial for members to regard their instructors as professional. "Appearance is everything. Putting an effort into your appearance while teaching is important. You don't have to spend hundreds of dollars on the latest and greatest apparel, but a good, clean appearance goes a long way to

letting everyone know you take your job seriously as a professional."

Fitness research and development necessitate that fitness standards change, so professionals must keep up their continuing education with courses that are pertinent to what they teach. Although the current recertification procedures do not require discipline-specific choices, Puskarich suggests that professional instructors "can only stay on top of trends and engage in career development if they seek out both live and e-learning continuing education courses that ultimately reflect and enhance in some way what they will end up doing back in the classroom."

Being professional includes staying current with AFAA's *Basic Exercise Standards and Guidelines*. An instructor's class may be popular and packed, but not professional if the teacher includes any of the following, right off the bat, in the first few minutes of a group movement class:

- side-chassés
- high-impact moves in the frontal plane
- quick, aggressive spinal twisting and punching without a limbering warm-up for the spine
- jumping on one leg for more than eight consecutive times.

Professionalism also includes taking the high road: avoid attacking peers, and instead simply state one's source of objective information. Whenever a colleague's credibility is put into question, professional instructors simply voice *their* opinion without subjectively referring to that of another. For example, students once approached this author when subbing a step class, commenting, "The regular instructor said that we burn more fat if we go faster, so we're used to doing step at 140 beats per minute here." This author simply cited AFAA standards in the answer, commenting, "As an AFAA certified professional, I am required to follow these international standards for fitness professionals which state that we get a better total body workout, with less risks, stepping at speeds below 130."

Professionalism includes memberships to organizations and subscriptions to fitness publications. Joining other associations that may be specific to one's discipline offers additional ways to take one's fitness career professionally. Just like an AFAA membership (for USA-based instructors) includes a subscription to *American Fitness*, a yoga teacher may subscribe to *Yoga Journal*, or investigate joining Yoga Alliance, for example. In addition to offering more resources of information, such affiliations look great on résumés, LinkedIn® profiles, and even social media posts because they reveal an instructor who takes initiative to further his or her career beyond the requirement of certification.

As professionals strive to develop their careers, they should give constant attention to the words "popular" and "professional" and continuously investigate ways to strengthen both. Being truly "untouchable" in the industry occurs when one is just as popular as professional, and such should be the goal of each instructor and trainer. AF

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