



How to Improve Retention In Tough Times

In today's economy, many martial arts schools are feeling the crunch. New students aren't flocking to schools in the numbers they did a year ago. To overcome this challenge, school owners must, at a minimum, retain their existing students. Retention, therefore, has become perhaps the most important element in running a contemporary school. Professor Brannon Beliso of San Francisco, California, a martial arts millionaire, shares his insights into becoming "Recession Proof" in these challenging economic times through strategic retention.

By Professor Brannon Beliso



Retention is often overshadowed by enrollments and renewals. Many school owners devote much of their time and resources to enrollments and renewals because they produce *instant* revenue. When they enroll a new student or renew an existing one, they receive immediate payment.

Conversely, retention is a long-term investment where you reap the benefits over time. It is similar to the philosophy, "The seeds you plant today will one day bear the fruit of tomorrow."

Recognize the value and importance of retention. It can greatly reduce your attrition (drop-out) rate. Do everything in your martial arts business with retention in mind.

Rich in Life Skills

Offer a curriculum that is rich in "life skills." This is the bread and butter of any successful martial arts school that specializes in children. Emphasize life skills such as focus, discipline, family, respect, teamwork and confidence. Make sure they are at the forefront of your curriculum and in all your classes.

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Promote life skills from the initial phone inquiry, to the evaluation, to the first class and in every interaction thereafter. Through the life skills you teach, parents are more likely to invest in your school. They will view it as an environment of higher learning versus an extracurricular activity for their children.

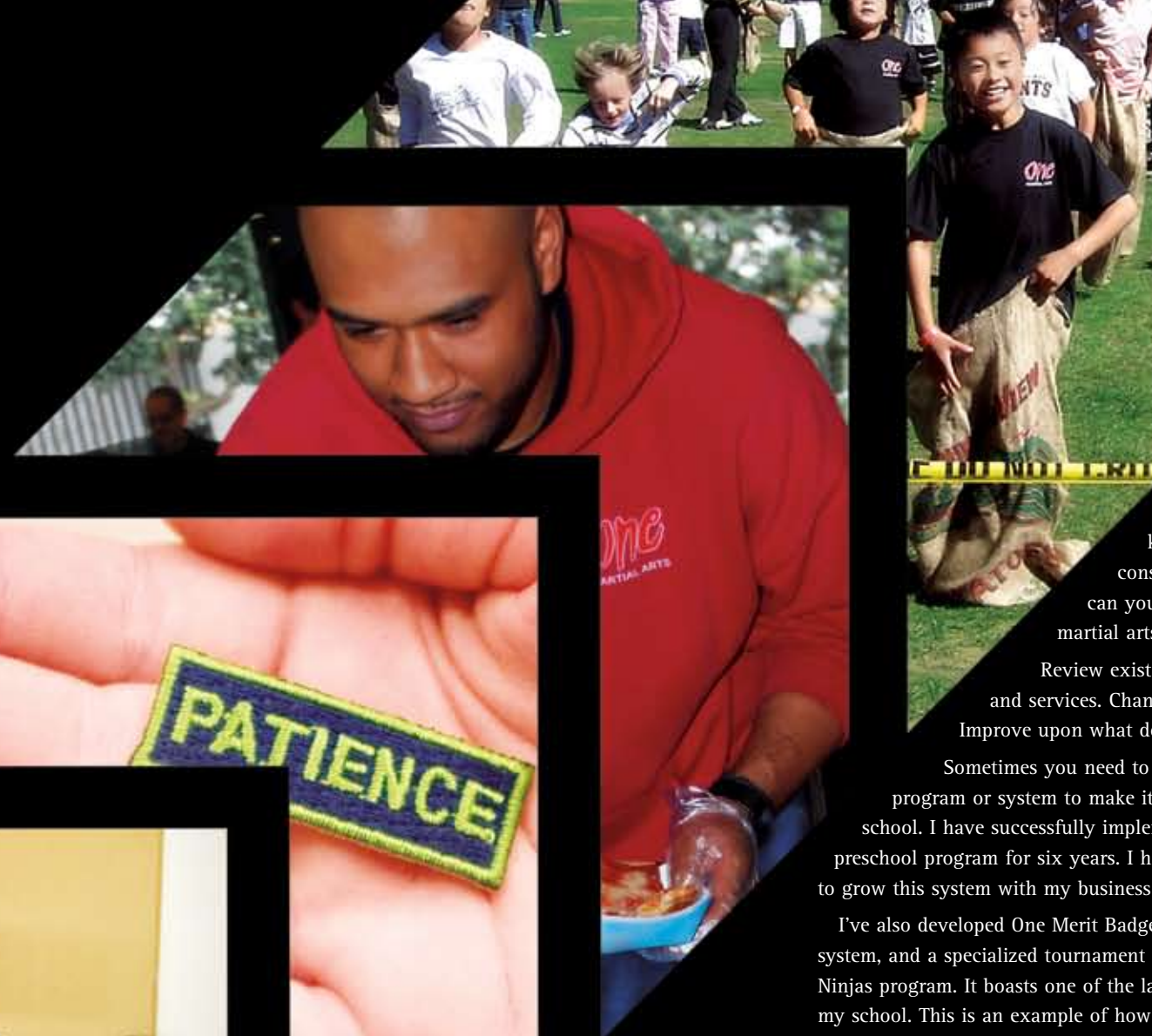
Invest in Yourself

Invest in yourself because *you* are your best investment. Achieve this through continued learning. Remember, "Complacency is the enemy." Many school owners get complacent with the routine of their classes and business. They forget to keep learning.

Live the age-old adage, "Always a student, never a master." As long as you keep learning, you will grow and so will your business.

A new teaching method or drill can breathe life into a routine class. Implementing a new program creates excitement and diversity. There are many credible resources and associations that offer programs and systems that have proved to be successful in the martial arts industry.

I am currently a member of the Martial Arts Industry Association (MAIA). It offers everything from staff training, ad slicks, class themes, drills, newsletters,



This says they have lost their focus. Focus means, "To pay attention." Pay attention to every aspect of your business. Master what you have learned to become successful. Remember, "Learning is not the same as knowing." Only through consistent effort and practice can you master running your martial arts business better.

Review existing programs, systems and services. Change what doesn't work. Improve upon what does.

Sometimes you need to make adjustments to a program or system to make it fit the model of your school. I have successfully implemented the "Little Ninjas" preschool program for six years. I have made improvements to grow this system with my business on a path to success.

I've also developed One Merit Badges, a life-skills retention system, and a specialized tournament to help enhance my Little Ninjas program. It boasts one of the largest enrollments in my school. This is an example of how a system that has been reviewed and improved can help retention.

to interviews with industry leaders.

Each resource offered me a path to being my best, with results that improved the quality of my school, increased my revenue and improved my retention. Invest in yourself; it will be one of the best returns you will ever see.

Perceived Added Value

Offer specialty events and perks at no extra charge. This creates "perceived added value." In my school, we offer Easter, Father's Day, Halloween, and Buddy parties. We host an annual picnic for about eight hundred people. We give 30-day memberships to our parents during "Parent's Appreciation Month."

We also offer monthly workshops and a weekly practice class to our martial arts students. We award a complimentary private lesson when a student turns in a straight "A" report card and has perfect attendance in karate. We send out birthday postcards offering a ten-percent discount on all our memberships and services. We offer a special two-hour cardio kickboxing workout and complimentary t-shirt to members during the holidays.

This perceived added value demonstrates our commitment to our students, members and parents. It goes a long way in building retention.

Consistently Improve Everything!

Make the consistent effort to do everything better in your martial arts business. Remember how you consistently trained to earn your black belt? Is it not that same consistency that took you from a white belt all the way to being a successful school owner?

I've spoken to several owners whose businesses have dropped in the past year. Most admit they have stopped doing what they did to become successful. When asked why they stopped, the most common answer is, "I don't know."



Over-Servicing: Give More Than Is Asked

Retention is built on over-servicing your students, members and parents. Always give more than is asked of you. It promotes customer satisfaction. If they're satisfied with your service, they will refer you to potential new students.

Nothing speaks louder about your business than referrals. They are the most cost-effective way to advertise and attract new students. Industry standards have proved that it takes six times as many advertising dollars to enroll a new student

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Create an outstanding customer experience. It makes your school the *only* place people want to come to and the last place they want to leave. It is the experience that's created from the result of over-servicing them.

Review every aspect of your school's operations. Be very thorough in this process. It's not just the little things that count. It is *everything* that counts.

Here's an example of this experience. Say a younger student doesn't make it to a bathroom break in time. We'll avoid the details, but the experience we create is very tactful. It doesn't disrupt the class in progress or put focus on the child that may lead to embarrassment

or inconvenience the parent. We even offer a change of clothes and a plastic bag to take the wet ones home in.

In most cases, the child returns to class with a big smile on his/her face. Both child and parent walk away satisfied.

Create an outstanding customer experience by facilitating each and every challenge in your school.

Train your staff effectively. This is the key to any successful business. Your staff is the backbone of your school. Everything they say and do create an outstanding customer experience.

From implementing a dynamic curriculum to presenting a well-kept school, your staff makes it happen.

Conduct weekly meetings. Focus your agenda on achieving all your retention goals through over-servicing your students, members and parents. Train and retrain your staff as needed.

Practice an "attitude of gratitude." Be grateful you own a business doing what you love. Be grateful for every student, member and parent who walks through the door of your school. Be grateful every day they choose to stay.

If you practice this philosophy, I believe you'll always make the conscious effort to over-serve them. Is your cup half full or half empty? I believe, "My cup runneth over." Always be grateful for each and every day you are offered. An attitude of gratitude will greatly improve the quality of your life and the retention of your martial arts business.

Invest in Relationships

Invest in relationships. Be committed to do this with everyone in your school. This is the heart and soul of retention. It promotes loyalty and longevity.

My school grossed over a million dollars in 2008. I don't have a Black Belt Club, accumulative belt-testing fees, upgrades or contracts. What I *do* have is relationships I invest into passionately. I have loyal students, members and parents who value those relationships as much as I do.

People will always invest into relationships they perceive as "valuable." Make sure they view your school as an investment for themselves and their children. Create an environment and experience that people want to invest into again and again.

The Need for Change

The current economic situation shows the martial arts industry there is a need for change in the way we do business. Retention is the key to this change and to becoming "recession proof." Recognize the importance of retention.

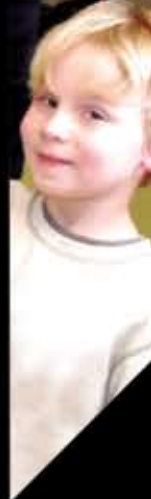
Instruct a curriculum rich in "life skills." Invest in yourself through continued learning.

Make the consistent effort to do everything better in your martial arts business. Implement proven systems. Review and improve existing ones.

Offer specialty events and perks that promote "perceived added value." Over-serve everyone who walks through your door. Create an outstanding customer experience. Train your staff effectively. Practice an "attitude of gratitude."

Above all, invest in the relationship of every student, member and parent in your school with all your heart.

Professor Brannon Beliso is the owner and head instructor of One Martial Arts in San Francisco, California. Since opening its doors in 2000, One Martial Arts has grown from a single owner/operator to five full-time employees and over 600 active students. In 2008, Beliso's school grossed over \$1 million. He can be reached at brannonb@pacbell.net.



Perform from Your Heart

Do everything in your school from your heart. If you simply follow a manual or read from a script without truly meaning it, people will see right through that.

A classic example of this is a telemarketer who calls you and is obviously reading from a script making his/her pitch. There's nothing more insincere and unappealing.

I believe in the old saying, "Do what you love and the money will come." Conduct your business from your heart and not just your mind. Don't base your school strictly upon statistics and putting your bottom line ahead of the needs of your students, members, and parents. Always put their needs first. It demonstrates sincerity and how much you truly value their relationship.