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| **Part 7 from Thomas Plummer****Fighting Back to Protect Your Business** |

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| **The next step is the hardest step.**“We are at the end of the beginningNow we work towards the beginning of the end”—Winston ChurchillThis was written about eighty years ago and applies directly today to what is happening in the gym business. We have muddled through the first stage, but now the hard work begins.The next stage of reopening will be the hardest. You have to convince a wary client you can keep him safe in an environment not universally known for cleanliness. If you ask the average consumer, we are more known as an industry packing people in for cheap prices, lines for cardio and the more the better when it comes to clients. In our surveys done by the NFBA through the years, the number one reason women left their gym was cleanliness issues, a perception that will be hard to change during a pandemic. The training gyms generally view themselves as a step above in cleanliness, but the standard of cleanliness we have applied during the years is not high enough to pacify a nervous client who questions if the coach that just trained him is any good at cleaning bathrooms to a high enough standard to keep him safe. There are owners out there demanding to open now, who scream their rights are being violated, and will open as fast they can get it done. The question you must ask yourself is this doing my business any good now and will doing a hard, fast opening possibly destroy my business later?Yes, when you reopen there will clients walking through the door not caring about the rules set by state you live in, and would flaunt any rules anyway just out of a sense of rebellion, but there will not be enough of these renegades to fill a gym, and in fact, their presence may drive out the clients you need over time.**The hardest advice I have ever given**The hardest advice I have ever given anyone in my long career of helping gym owners succeed in business is the advice I am giving in this letter, “Slow down, find the pace of this, you do not have to be the first one open in your area, and in most cases, you do not want to go first.” In other words, just because you can open early does not mean you should be one of the first.Here are thoughts on what has to happen next in your business: **Are the clients ready to come back?**A variety of surveys have shown the clients are not ready to come back to the gyms yet. If you open too early, you will attract the clients that keep the others you need later out of your business. The “defiant,” meaning the ones who will refuse to wear masks if dictated by the government, or who will defy time limits or push total gym limits, do all of this at the expense of the clients who are waiting to see how you, the owner, handles the first few weeks.My advice would be to wait about a week past official opening dates, contact your clients often telling them you are waiting to see how if there will be additional rules or restrictions and that you are pushing forward with increased safety precautions. In other words, let someone else take the hit if this goes badly, and let the market settle when it comes to potential clients. Many members will try their gyms, not feel safe, and want to shop and that is when your prudence pays off by waiting a few extra days, which you would promote heavily on social media. **What was your reputation before you closed?**If you had a questionable reputation for being clean prior to closing, there is nothing, and I emphasize nothing, you can do to change this mindset once you are open. You can only change your image of cleanliness before you reopen.Few gyms will ever be as clean as they need to be when you reopen unless you have a plan to completely, and the emphasis is on the word, “completely” change the experience of your gym. Many of you won’t paint your gym citing artwork or colors that have only been up for a year and were expensive, but you should paint your gym to convey that you’ve made changes.Many of you will not part with those piles of equipment you have accumulated because all stuff once cost you big money and you might use it all again, but clutter is dirt in the client’s mind. Your unwillingness to let go of equipment crammed into corners works against the client expecting change. And most of you will not take down artwork, clear the messes on your desks and counters or even figure out if you can get in and out of your gym safely because you do not feel it is necessary, and you will be the owners who wonder why your clients never reappeared. **Stop protecting what you own and create what you need to go forward in a changed world.**There is clean, then there is post virus, must be clean beyond reproach clean, and you can only establish that in the client’s head prior to reopening. For those of you who will do it right, start now by running posts showing the gym changing, being painted, being cleaned, the dumpster where you are throwing out old junk, you installing hand sanitizer stations, unpacking your boxes of gloves and a hundred other things you need to do to create a vision that sticks in your clients of you showing leadership by reinventing your gym. All these videos would post for seven days and be promoted for just several dollars a day, but you want a lot of them floating in the market the weeks prior to opening. Thirty percent of the gyms in the country are either closed now for good, or will stumble and fail the first ninety days you are reopened. This means there will be shoppers in the market looking for a new gym home. The work you do prior to opening, letting the community know you are taking safety measures beyond your competition, will stick in their minds when they decide now is the time to step into a gym again.These potential clients are not initially looking for workouts, financial deals or schedules. They will be primarily concerned on the safety of your gym and that issue will linger in the market for at least the first six months you are open. **Do not force the client to adapt**Some of the box gyms are planning to attempt social distancing by putting out of order signs on every other treadmill. How much will this piss off clients waiting to get on a tread. The gym is not showing leadership here, it is forcing the client to adapt to a bad way of doing businessLeadership would be to take out every other tread and put it into storage. Yes, this is much more expensive, but which way would establish trust, leadership, and not anger a client who will just take down the sign and attempt to do it anyway upsetting other clients nearby and setting up a confrontation with the gym management?And without open windows and better air circulation, even the eight-foot rule where you keep the clients on cardio separated by eight feet from belly button to belly button can be questioned because of the heavy breathing associated with cardio work. Space and distancing will be the rule, but how far can you, or are you willing, to push the limits of your gym?Do not think of this as a temporary problem, fix it as best you can to create a totally safe factor in the client’s head. The perfect example is the training gym’s front door and lobby area.If you have been in business more than a year, these areas become so second nature to you that you become “gym blind,” meaning you are in the gym more than you are in your own home and just do not see the mess, clutter and spacing. Front counters accumulate dozens of odd things over time, and again, the clutter is dirty in the client’s mind.We also think about distancing in the workouts, but forget about getting the clients in and out of the gyms. Narrow lobbies, multiple doors, stopping to check in trapped in a confined space are all barriers to getting your clients back to the gym. Walk your way back inside as if you have never seen the gym. Start at your car and head toward the front door. What would a client see that you do not notice any longer? A worn handle you have touched a hundred times without thinking about it becomes a stop and think moment for the client. Do I really want to touch that thing?Where do I stand while the guy in front of me checks in? How do I use the bathroom safely at the gym? Do I have to enter passing people leaving that are sweaty and breathing hard? You do not think about these things anymore, but your clients have worked all this out in their heads and unless you solve these barrier issues prior to opening, and get the word out to the clients and potential clients in your market, you cannot do it once opened. You cannot change a mindset once the gym is back in business.**The rule of thirds should drive your decision-making processes**Think about your membership this way: one third of them feel bulletproof and do not care about any of this believing they are safe because of their age or illusion of safety; one third are timid and will be hesitant waiting for further proof of safety after you open before coming back (testimonials from the first members who came back and found it safe will help bring them back); and the last third is terrified and will return last, if at all, unless you convince them slowly and consistently they will be safe in this gym. It may take three to six months to get this group back into our gym, but they will come back if you build trust that you can keep them safe. Make all your decisions for the last third. Do everything as an overkill to make the terrified people feel safe and the rest of the clients will come alone anyway. Are gloves necessary? The terrified will not come back knowing they have to touch equipment someone just handled. Are electronic door openers necessary? Knowing I can get into your gym without touching a door handle makes me feel better already.Do everything for the terrified, and prove it to them prior to opening, and the other two groups will be easy. **Your social media rants change nothing and hurt your business**I understand your frustration. I hear it daily on the twenty or thirty calls I take a week. I know you are scared, had enough, afraid of losing your business, but ranting on social media does nothing, changes nothing, and alienates clients looking for leadership, not politics.There are many owners who hate this advice and argue. “I have the right to do whatever I want and express my political opinion if I want to,” they say, and they are right, but the client also has the right to disagree and walk away, and about half will.My advice is to stop expressing your frustration on social media. Rants on the unfairness of government policy, your defiance at being forced to remain closed, or why some businesses get to open, does not change anyone one’s mind but does make those on the other side of the argument not want to do business with you.Go back to the gym owner in New York. He opened and even made the news. He took a stance, stood hard, and opened against the state’s recommendations, and against most health officials vision of safety too.He made his point and attracted a number of old clients who showed up to support him, but what did he do to his reputation in the community? Would anyone scared of the virus show up now or later? How many people felt he was right versus those who thought he endangered others unnecessarily? To me, rants on social media is what you do when you pretend to do something, because I do not believe a political rant has ever changed a single mind. If you want to be active, then write letters to your representatives, donate to candidates, actively lobby for change, and take action that does make change, but if you own a small business I recommend staying out of politics since any side you take has about fifty percent against you and will you risk half of your business to write a rant on social media that changes nothing?Is it your right? Yes. Is it good business? No. You have to make that decision but consider keeping your politics to yourself if you are dependent on clients who might have different viewpoints than you do. **What about online training?**Online training has saved a lot of gym owners. You standing in workout clothes jumping up and down with little squares on the screen has proven to be an effective way to keep the money arriving in a gym sitting dark.Here are several thoughts on online and what will happen once you will reopen:Most of your online people will hesitate to return immediately. Offer online continued workouts for ninety days, but put a review deadline on the date. Clients not sure will cling to online, but will return when they feel safe. If you continue past ninety days, do not discount for this service. You may have clients that just want to do this, but small groups, for example, may not hold together as some of the clients come back to the gym.Remember, the clients loved online because there was no gym available. When you are back, they will seek out the herd and return to the energy of the gym when they feel safe. I suggest you continue to use online support going forward for all clients. Concentrate on extras that add value to your memberships, such as meditation, nutritional support, restoration of natural movement, such as flow patterns they can do at home or work and other tools that enhance the client experience. Consider a rigorous six-day a week commitment to this.You may find a population you never had before that will only want online. Do not charge less for this service. One on one clients, for example, may want to continue doing several video workouts a week at home. Do not discount for this service, it takes the same energy, if not more, to get this done. You may even find an online specialty, such as women over forty, that can be ran as a separate business within your business. **What does all of this mean?**Go slow, create an environment for the third that are terrified, and plan for at least three months after you reopen to get your membership back, if you did all the work you should have done prior to opening as listed in earlier letters.I feel your frustration, but cooler heads will win this battle. Be patient and work on keeping the clients safe, and promoting what you do consistently while closed.Do not forget about the two-week pivot point prior to opening detailed in the other letters. This is the period where you reach out to all old clients and invite them home, touch all missed sales and personally call every client to invite them back and let them know what you have done to keep them safe.This is also where you need to promote testimonials done by clients, such as doctors or health care people talking about how safe your gym is adding a thirty-day trial to get potential clients going with you.Do not forget about your website. Everything on the site should reflect what you are doing to change up your gym. Yes, success for clients is important and testimonials supporting that are still good, but be more concerned about getting a scared person in your door first. If he or she feels safe, then you have a chance to prove how good your gym is. Your clients should come back in two waves. The first group will arrive the first forty-five days, which will be the ones who are less afraid and have been following your efforts to rebuild the gym online. The second wave will be the scared ones waiting to see if it is safe, and then former clients and missed business who will seek you out as they drift back. It will take ninety days to get your life back. The rules will change by the week, but remember it is easier to back off the overkill then it is to struggle to add stuff that should have been done earlier.  |

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| Thomas Plummer Consulting, LLC | 6351 Portofino Lane, Melbourne, FL 32940 |

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