

The Business of Being a Better Coach

Coaches base their entire working lives on ensuring their students are developing as players, with few realising that developing their business opportunities as coaches is equally important. **By Dieter Wilhelmi**

As professional coaches we spend a lot of time learning to understand our game. We develop a thorough understanding of technique and its application. We use our knowledge and expertise in looking towards the future so that we can develop our players to meet the challenges of our ever-changing game. We study strengths and weaknesses in our players so that we can develop game strategies. We then communicate these so that they are able to maximise their potential.

But what are you doing to increase *your* potential? As professional coaches we get paid for these services and we need to spend similar energies in operating a successful coaching business. Developing a business strategy is very similar to that of developing a game strategy. We need to develop a thorough understanding of our strength and weaknesses and we need to consider our business opportunities and threats – also known as a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats).

Being a great coach does not necessarily translate into operating a profitable tennis business. We need to spend as much time developing business skills as we spend developing coaching skills. We often ask our athletes to undertake a SWOT analysis in relation to their game and to develop strategies so that they can build on their strengths, manage their weaknesses, maximise their opportunities and minimise their threats.

But when was the last time that you as a coach have applied these principles to running and operating your coaching business? As coaches, we need to ask ourselves what are our strengths and weaknesses in being able to run a business? What is your understanding of the service industry?

Perceived Service Quality

Coaches know that client retention is one of the key considerations in running a successful coaching business. However, from a business perspective a tennis lesson is like any other product or service that a consumer purchases. As coaches we need to understand that a tennis lesson is intangible in that it cannot be felt or touched by the client. Consequently, the quality of the service is 'perceived' by the client. For example, you may have given what you considered a good tennis lesson as the pupil has finally been able to use the correct grip for their serve. The client, however, feels that they missed many serves with the new grip and leaves the lesson with the perception that it was unsuccessful. So what can we do? From a coaching perspective,

we try to communicate the successful attributes of the lesson and ensure that the student finishes on a high note – always a good marketing ploy!

It is difficult for the customer to judge the quality of your service and compare it, so it is important to make the service more appealing. Tangible aspects such as the physical appearance of the coaching centre, the quality of your equipment, your appearance and the quality of your promotional material can increase the impact of your coaching service.

Coaches must focus on these tangible aspects whilst demonstrating empathy, care and individualised attention to our clients. Being reliable and responsive to client needs is another way of demonstrating service quality. It is important for coaches to close the gap between expected and perceived service quality (the marketing gap). The ideal service standard is to exceed the customer's expectations when it comes to service delivery.

Another factor in delivering service quality involves understanding the marketing function of your staff. Your coaching staff are responsible for the delivery of the product and are often the main factors in the quality a customer seeks. This is highly important as the delivery of quality service can be seen by some of the criteria by which customers evaluate quality service. These may include aspects such as appearance, responsiveness to their needs, competence and courtesy. All of the above criteria are fully dependent on the training, skills and abilities of people in delivering quality service. This means that we must have strong involvement in the process of staffing. We need to realise that the level of training and abilities of our staff become 'marketing variables'.

The model below demonstrates some of the key components in how a client perceives quality service.



