

Three Steps to Making Great Money as a Certified Personal Trainer in the Commercial Fitness Industry

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In a recent article in CNN Money titled “Best Jobs in America,” Certified Personal Trainer was listed as 18 out of 100 jobs in its category, with median pay being \$56,000 and top pay averaging \$128,000. (This is out of 251,400 total personal trainer jobs.) The personal training industry has grown 24% in the last ten years and is a potential financial windfall for those certified personal trainers who know how to build their client portfolio. The issue is, some personal trainers simply do not.

As the General Sales Manager of the National Council for Certified Personal Trainers with over ten years of experience as a Personal Training Director, I’ve certified, managed, and helped build the client portfolio for personal trainers who have made six figures consistently. For many trainers, such success seems like an abstract pipedream. However, for those who have mastered the art of recruiting new clients and retaining them, 100k plus annually is easily within the realm of possibility. Are you one of the personal training superstars that make in the neighborhood of six figures annually? If not, that’s your cue to pay close attention to the rest of this article!

I’ve also witnessed numerous personal trainers enter the industry with big dreams becoming the next Les Miles or Tony Horton and fizzle out after earning minimum wage for their first few months trying to find their way in the fitness industry. It doesn’t have to be that way. The industry climate is almost perfect for a personal trainer with the right qualifications and approach to succeed in building a full portfolio of clients and training a jam-packed schedule within sixty days of certification. As the numbers in the CNN Money article clearly show, it’s not just possible, but plausible, that a personal trainer can reach this goal. Are you there yet? If not, here are three steps you need to take!

Three Steps to Making Money in the Commercial Fitness Industry:

1. Cultivate the Right Philosophy for Success (Personal Training is Sales!):

The main obstacle between a personal trainer and financial success in the commercial fitness industry is usually between the ears! Often, personal trainers don’t enter the fitness industry with the self-understanding necessary to make money in our profession. Sometimes, this lack of understanding of the job description of a successful personal trainer can lead to an entire lifetime of struggling

to make ends meet as a floor trainer at the local gym. More commonly, it leads to burnout and abandonment of the profession a personal trainer aspired to and worked hard to attain. What is this important concept that a good amount of personal trainers were never equipped to understand?

That a personal trainer position is a sales position.

As a Personal Training Director, I did numerous interviews on a weekly basis with trainers who wanted a position on my staff. The qualifications are rarely an issue; finding a trainer who can adequately assist clients with safely reaching their fitness goals is not difficult. What's uncommon is finding a trainer who understands their role as a sales representative for their personal training business. As part of the interview I would always ask, "How much do you need to make as one of our trainers and what is it going to take to get there?" The response was almost always a uniform combination of an inquiry about the pay structure and a reiteration that they are a skilled personal trainer. I very rarely heard answers along the lines of "I need to become friends with all the members on the floor of the gym...If I talk to ten people, chances are I'll have one new client, so I have to talk to 400 members to have a full schedule of forty clients." (On those sporadic occasions when I did, the interviewee had the position on the spot!). I had only one trainer who preempted my question about income at the beginning of our interview. When I asked him to tell me about himself, he promptly responded, "My name is Zach and if you give me a shot I'll blow the doors off this place. I feel strange when I'm not selling personal training and my fitness routine radically changes lives." Zach was my assistant manager within a month and had his own club within sixty days.

The fact is, most personal trainers assume they are service professionals, but the successful ones have realized that they are sales/service professionals. I blame the personal trainer certifications that simply do not equip trainers with the necessary business aspects essential for the success of a certified personal trainer in the commercial fitness industry. At the NCCPT, I'm proud to say we dedicate an entire chapter of our main course textbook (Ch. 14 of *The Power of Personal Training*, by John Platero) to "Business of Personal Training" (including everything from setting up a personal training business to sales philosophy and techniques). When I was managing personal training departments, I used to love seeing the NCCPT certification attached to a resume because I knew I was getting an opportunity to hire and applicant who understood the essential sales-related elements of the position. It drives me crazy that the more well-known, higher priced and best-marketed certifications don't equip trainers with the ins and outs of the service aspects of personal training, or don't prepare them in the least in regards to personal training sales.

2. Obtain Specialty Certifications (As Many as Possible!)

One of the most important things that a personal trainer can do to set up for financial success is to build their client base fast and immediately replace clients who are lost to attrition. Client training schedules vary based on a number of factors (facility, programs, etc.), but a good rule of thumb is that forty-eight active clients leads to a full work week. The manner that the trainer acquires those clients is also very important to their overall bottom line. Trainers who are assigned clients by a Personal Training Director will rarely earn a commission from the enrollment of the client in a personal training program. However, trainers who recruit their own clients usually do earn a commission for each enrollment. Say the average commission is \$250 and a trainer enrolls all forty-eight clients on their schedule, that trainer would earn \$12,000 in commissions alone for those enrollments. Add that to the per-session rate, and now we're talking about a really nice looking portfolio!

So, what is the best way to build up clients fast in the gym and replace the ones lost to attrition? One thing you do not want to do is to wait for the personal training sales staff to assign you clients. I've managed personal training departments in gyms where I've had forty trainers to feed clients to. In such an atmosphere, one thing is for certain, the trainer who is waiting for clients to get assigned to their schedule is usually the last one to get them. The trainers who are active in helping members on the workout floor and getting to know them are the much better off. However, the trainers who hold specialty certifications and are active with the member base are your biggest earners (by far).

A specialty certification is a certification that qualifies a trainer to instruct clients in an area of the commercial fitness industry not covered by the base personal trainer certification (CPT). The most valuable specialty certifications are the ones that allow the trainer to teach group exercise classes (Yoga, Kickboxing Cardio, Step, etc.) or those that allow the trainer to give performance-based nutrition assessments (Weight Management Specialist). If you understand the industry, then you know why. Personal trainers with group fitness specialty certifications are in front of large classes of potential clients who view them as an authority in fitness on a regular basis! Personal trainers who can perform nutritional assessments can draw clients who wouldn't normally be attracted to a personal training session but want some expert advice on their diet!

A trainer can always walk the floor pulling members off cardio equipment to check their anaerobic threshold and find members struggling with correct form on the Hammer Strength machines (for example) to book personal training assessments, (which is certainly recommended practice). However, how much easier is it for the personal trainer who is also a Certified Group Exercise Instructor or Certified Yoga Instructor that teaches classes with twenty-to-forty potential personal training clients daily to fill their schedule? Many people sign up for a gym membership just to go to the classes. The personal trainer with the group exercise-based specialty certifications are the only ones with regular access to this goldmine of prospective clients. Frankly, it surprises me that more personal trainers aren't certified to teach group classes. For obvious reasons, those are always the trainers that fill up the fastest! Ask any Group Exercise Instructor how many members approach them for fitness advice at the end of the session, and, even better, how many times members in their classes come up and flat-out ask them for private training sessions!

3. Put it into Practice (Go Get It!)

At the General Manager of the NCCPT, whenever I speak with one of our trainers having trouble making it in the industry it always comes down to practical application. Having gone through our curriculum, they know how essential sales are to the success of a trainer. (Some of them even have specialty certifications sitting there on their resume!). However, it's frustrating to find that often the trainer just doesn't apply the principles to practice!

If the issue is finding work at the gym, I'll ask, "When interviewing for the job, did you stress the fact that as an NCCPT-Certified Personal Trainer, you excel at finding new clients in the gym and going through the sales process?" I often find their answers unconvincing (I wouldn't have hired them either.). I share my story about my interview with Zach when I was a PTD and tell them in their next interview to say something right off the bat like: "Give me a shot and I'll blow the doors off this place! I get gross, I love selling personal training, you're gonna love me!"

If the problem is filling their schedule, the trainer will sometimes complain, “They aren’t giving me any new clients!” I always respond with a lesson on why and how they need to pretend like the personal training sales staff is not there and get their own clients.

As I mentioned, sometimes they’ll even have a Group Exercise, Yoga, or Weight Management Specialist certification and not even be on the roster as an instructor for the classes at the gym! There is rarely a good reason for this. Some personal trainers identify as professionals who deserve to have their clients “fed” to them. This is a surefire formula for disappointment with your career choice as a personal trainer. You want financial success in this industry? You have to go get it! Get out there on the floor, act like your name’s on the building. Get to know the members. Talk to everybody. Use your specialty certifications and teach all the classes you can!

If you’re not earning \$56,000 to \$128,000 as a personal trainer in the industry, there’s no better time than now to cultivate the right philosophy (personal training is sales), obtain specialty certifications (as many as possible), and then go get it! The resources are right there at your fingertips. I would be happy to have one of my NCCPT Career Counselors set you on the right track to success fast. Simply call 1.800.778.6060 or email personaltraining@nccpt.com and put “personal training career orientation” in the subject line. I promise, if you follow these steps and respect the process, success is right around the corner. We would love the opportunity to help get you there. Our society and culture is stocked with an overabundance of potential clients that need our help to get fit and healthy. No personal trainer should be letting their certification go to waste.