

## Successful Returns: How to Keep Your Clients Coming Back

By Stacy Sims, owner of Pendleton Pilates and author



### Stacy Sims

is the owner of Pendleton Pilates and the author of the novel *Swimming Naked*. She is also the founder of the True Body Project, a non-profit organization that helps teen girls and women connect with their bodies and voices. For more information about Pendleton Pilates, visit [www.pendletonpilates.com](http://www.pendletonpilates.com). For more information about the True Body Project, visit [www.truebodyproject.org](http://www.truebodyproject.org). *Swimming Naked* is available at booksellers nationwide.

When I keep up a steady, rigorous Pilates exercise routine, my life is always better in every way. When I slack off, however, I know I will soon be less comfortable in my body and with my life.

So why is it that some weeks, I'll find myself cutting back my own Pilates practice and inching toward more caffeine, more sugar, less sleep and even less patience? And why, most likely, will the same thing happen to some of your most devoted clients?

The answer is easy: we're incredibly busy and often make choices that don't make sense for our long-term well-being. That's why it's crucial to remember how hard it is for a client to walk through your doors, whether it's the first, the tenth or the hundredth time.

In 2001, when I opened my first studio, I had the advantage of working one-on-one with every client. At that time I might see 20 individuals a week. Today, we have between 280 and 300 client visits a week in our two locations.

So how do we stay connected? We work to remember the following: the most important thing a client can take away from his or her Pilates session is the desire to return. It's our job to facilitate both the desire and the return. Here's how:

### Create a Superior Introduction to Pilates

Like many studios and gyms, our clients must take an Initial Consultation Series (four private sessions) in order to enter Group Reformer classes. Our teachers, all of whom have trained in our intense four-month program, understand that the first session is the most important moment we have to really make a connection with the client and to allow them to experience the physical and mental benefits of a Pilates practice.

During these four introductory sessions, clients are made comfortable with an introduction to our vocabulary, the apparatus and the choreography they might expect during a Group Reformer class. If the client is not ready to enter into a Group environment, they are encouraged to take additional privates, we offer these additional privates at a reduced rate if necessary.

All new clients receive a note from me, the studio owner, with my cell phone number in case they experience any difficulties. They also receive a call from the studio manager to get them set up for classes. We take this opportunity to find out how we are doing.

We have recently introduced an "Initial Intensive" option. This is a 2 hour introductory workshop to Pilates, done in a small group setting. This has proven to be a successful option for busy people and we have not seen any diminished capacity for the work.

## Create a Stress-Free Environment

Most stress in an environment comes from the negative energy of the people in it. In our Teacher Training Program, we have created a full session that explores integrity as it relates to teaching. Our teachers-to-be take time to reflect on what are the characteristics of a good teacher, regardless of whether they teach math, literature or Pilates. We take away simple and elegant ideas from this session: create a safe environment, greet each client by name, leave your own baggage at home and, most importantly, remember that a good teacher is 100% focused on the client experience.

We also work very hard to keep our studio space clean, uncluttered and surprise-free. Our clients come to depend on us to be the place for a stress-free hour. So we make extra sure to have toilet paper, paper towels, hangers and all the other basics available for them. If we know there may be a parking challenge due to construction or road-work, we try to notify them in advance.

Additionally, you can easily create a few spa-like amenities for your clients. Put out a big bowl of green apples or a basket of cough drops in the winter. Make sure to have water available. If your teachers like to energize the space with candles or music, make sure they have what they need to create a personalized, warm environment. We pay a few of our teachers extra to stay and clean and/or organize the studio space. It is important to remember that the teacher's most important job is to teach. Anything else they do is above and beyond the call of duty and should be compensated as such.

## Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

Regardless of what kind of Pilates experience you create for your clients, many of them will find it hard to stay on track with their practice. It's your job to keep the door wide open and to remind them that you would love to see them back.

We have several promotions we run to help clients stay active at the studio. One is a "Stay Centered" promotion that encourages and rewards goal-setting. For example, if you sign up for classes twice a week and maintain all your classes for 12 weeks, you will be rewarded with free classes. I also write a regular e-mail newsletter that goes out to active and inactive clients and is designed to be both inspirational and informative.

Additionally, we track our clients. After three months, I make personal phone calls or write emails to those who have started with us and dropped off. We offer them a free session to return. It provides us with an opportunity to find out how we might have better served a client.

## Train and Retain Superior People

Maybe the most important thing we have done is to invest a lot of time and energy into training and retaining excellent teaching staff and studio management. Our team cares deeply about Pilates and the client experience. We endeavor to pay the staff well and to create a great environment to teach in and to practice in. We have worked hard to create a standard of excellence and continuity for our clients while allowing for innovation and inspiration from within our staff and from the amazing teachers in the Pilates community..

Remember that it can be difficult for clients to make the commitment to get to the studio. So reward them for making it. Following these steps will give you a solid blueprint for creating an environment where your clients feel welcome when they arrive and where they'll want to return again and again.