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Fitness studio needs help getting into shape

An expert offers the owner advice on making her Agoura Hills business a financial success.

July 04, 2011 | By Cyndia Zwahlen

New business owner Emily Belanger was recently sawing a hole through an interior wall at her Agoura Hills fitness studio to make room for an air conditioner.

The next morning she was taking apart the restroom sink faucet to fix a leak. That was after she taught her morning Pilates classes and before her afternoon clients showed up.

It was just another day in the busy schedule Belanger keeps at the Strong Body Studio, which she started in January 2010 in a small industrial park.

What the owner doesn't find much time to do is think ahead or focus on planning for her business.

"I'd like to be less reactive in the growth of my business," said Belanger, 56, who opened her studio after a partnership with another studio owner was short-lived.

She is passionate about her style of Pilates, which she calls West Coast Progressive. Belanger said she sees herself not so much as an exercise instructor but more as a language teacher helping students to listen to what their bodies are telling them they need.

And she wants to share it with as many people as possible: She'd like to do outreach in the community and train instructors in her style. She'd like to be a spokeswoman for her Pilates equipment manufacturer. And she wants to cultivate a high-end clientele able to plunk down several hundred dollars each month on a consistent basis for private classes.

That could help her meet one of her other goals: to break even this year by bringing in about \$48,000 in revenue. Belanger charges \$75 for a one-hour private Pilates class and \$35 or less per person for small group classes.

Belanger's exercise and fitness knowledge are strong points for the new business, said Karen Jashinsky, chief executive of O2 Max Fitness Inc. of Santa Monica and a member of the advisory board of the nonprofit Entrepreneur Mentor Society in Sun Valley.

But "not all of her objectives necessarily align with what she is doing and how she is spending her time," said Jashinsky, a frequent panelist for the IDEA Health & Fitness Assn., a San Diego-based trade group. After checking out the studio, here are some of her recommendations.

• **Decide on three goals for the business.** Most important, determine the financial return on each.

"This is a difficult exercise," Jashinsky said. But it will reveal which objectives to focus on first.

• **Identify the target customer.** "She needs to list out all of the different types of people she may be able to bring in and figure out what the returns, or revenue stream, could be for each one," Jashinsky said.

Belanger is drawing in some customers with local social media coupons, but said they often don't come back when the discount is over.

And if she wants to cater to a wealthy clientele, she would need to make sure her studio has the right amenities, and that her prices aren't too low, Jashinsky said.

"She needs to show she is worth that," Jashinsky said.

• **Brand the studio's workout.** Belanger has created her own style of Pilates instruction, which is an important differentiation for the studio. Pick a name for it, such as the West Coast Progressive Pilates she has used informally, Jashinsky said, and use it consistently for marketing. That includes the website's home page.

• **Recruit an intern.** The studio has no employees, but Belanger should consider starting now to find a fall intern from a local kinesiology or sports and fitness college program, the consultant suggested. Belanger could train the intern in her method and have them help her with marketing and other business tasks.

• **Find or set up an entrepreneur group.** Meeting with other business owners to solve problems and learn from one another will help build business skills, the consultant said. It could also lead to cross-promoting studio services.

• **Plan for the long term.** "There are obviously only so many hours you have to train in the day to begin with so you are going to max out on what you are going to make, even if you are training every hour of the day," Jashinsky said. "And what happens when you can't do that

anymore?"

With other members on her team, the owner will have more time to create focused growth strategies, and find a low-cost contractor to help with repairs.

"She needs to find ways to replicate herself and it could be done a few different ways," the consultant said. "But if she doesn't start planning for that, then it will never happen."

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