

THE JJGF GUIDE TO STUDENT RETENTION



When academy owners talk about growing their businesses, they often think in terms of new and more.

They want new opportunities and new leads so that they can, in turn, get more students. Looking outward for growth is critical for any business—jiu-jitsu academies included—but too often we see academy owners ignore the growth opportunities within their own businesses. When you build your business strategy from the inside of your academy out, you capitalize on a powerful source of revenue: student retention.

Keeping the students you have is not a new idea, but it is underestimated. The Harvard Business Review often touts [a groundbreaking study](#) that quantified just how important retention can be. If you can increase your customer retention by 5%, you can increase profits by 25% to 95%. The profit potential of retention is driven by multiple factors:

- Keeping customers costs much less money than finding new ones
- The better your retention, the more profit you generate from every new customer entering your business
- Customers that are loyal are also advocates for your business, inviting their friends to try
- Loyal customers are more likely to become “super fans,” buying more of your products and services than casual customers

Student retention is a huge opportunity in your academy, and while your current retention rate is likely respectable, you are missing out on chances to keep more of the students you work so hard to earn, which is why the Jiu-Jitsu Global Federation produced this e-book. We are going to give you a step-by-step guide for overhauling your student retention so that you retain more students and generate more capital that you can use to fuel your continued growth.

As you read our recommendations, do not feel obligated to execute them in order or all at once. Building a business is a process, and like you often tell your own students: consistently moving forward, even if you are taking small steps, leads to impressive results.

If you like the material in this e-book, the JJGF releases new actionable insights each month on how you can improve and grow your gym.

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1. CUSTOMER RETENTION BEGINS WITH THE SALES PROCESS

Traditionally, we often think of student retention as something that happens after a student has bought a uniform, signed a contract, and started taking classes. In practice, however, whether or not a person stays with your academy for the long-term is a process that begins the very first time they experience your gym—your advertising, your website, and their initial visit. While you're right to think that these individuals are prospects, not customers, consider this:

All of the steps leading up to that first signed student contract are driven by promises and expectations. Your prospect has a vision in mind of why they want to train, and you and your fellow gym managers are building on that vision as your sales process leads up to the contract.

When your sales process does not align with the experience in the rest of the gym or if your sales process is lackluster, you can potentially weaken your relationship with the student from the beginning. Here's how you can refine your sales process with a mind toward retention.

Expectations Big and Small

An old saying goes, "Under-promise and over-deliver." Instead, how about you make straightforward promises and keep them? There's no need to hide your true value, and delivering on the expectation you set in itself will drive customer satisfaction in a big way. Small expectations like "I'll call you this evening to schedule your introductory class" when you reply to an email matter, and so do big expectations like "Yes, our jiu-jitsu classes teach self-defense techniques." If you promise that your gym is family-friendly and your students are welcoming, you should be enforcing etiquette and establishing a culture (more on that later) that makes that statement true.

When you set an expectation and meet it, the customer trusts you more. When you fail to meet expectations, even if they seem minor, your customer will notice, and that gives them ammunition to justify to themselves why they quit your school.

Creating a Vision for the Student

A range of reasons can prompt prospects to inquire about taking jiu-jitsu classes. Perhaps they are fans of mixed martial arts, or maybe they would like to get in shape, or maybe a recent life experience has them thinking more about how they defend themselves and their families. Whatever a student's reason for contacting you, you should talk to the prospective student about his or her goals and paint a clear picture of how training with you and your students will make that vision a reality.

This concept is present in most sales methodologies, like solution selling or relationship selling, but it is worth emphasizing. When you define what a prospect's goals are—what they want out of being your student—you can clearly explain your programs will help them achieve those goals. At the same time, you can establish expectations for what they can expect after a month, a year, or five years of training.

Painting that vision up front means that every time a student attends a class, they can feel as though they are moving forward toward that goal, and when students have a stronger grasp on how their day-to-day commitment to training propels them forward, they are more likely to continue moving forward.

For your part, when you know a student's goals, you can bring them up later to keep him or her motivated to continue training (we will talk later about how you can use your customer relationship management system, or CRM, to make this easier).

Contracts are Good for Everyone

The case for contracts being good for your business is easy to make: When students are under contract instead of paying month-to-month, you can more accurately project your revenue, taking the guesswork out of how much you will have to cover expenses, pay your people, and invest in marketing. Better yet, if you are using an automated billing system (we will cover that later too), you don't need to chase students down to collect dues.

Students totally new to martial arts might shy away from signing a contract, but that gives you the opportunity to talk about how it's good for them. A contract helps students be more consistent, since they've made a commitment to themselves and their goals. A contract simplifies the headaches of having to jump off the mat with a credit card to pay-up for that month. And a contract can be a way to save money, assuming that you offer incentives for long-term sign-ups.

Here are some points about contracts you should consider:

- ▶ Offer one-month, three-month, six-month, and twelve-month contracts
- ▶ Step the pricing down each month to make the monthly value of a twelve-month contract incredibly clear and the choice to sign-up for three months instead of one month equally clear
- ▶ The one-month sticker price may seem large, but that's by design
- ▶ Decide ahead of time how you will handle students sitting out for injuries or life crises (perhaps bill them as usual and credit them the months they are gone at the end of the contract)
- ▶ Decide how you will handle students moving away
- ▶ Offer family rates for when mothers and fathers also want their children to train

A well-designed contract program will actually increase your attendance and improve your retention. Students are simply less likely to quit if they've made this symbolic commitment.

2. THE BEGINNING OF THE STORY FORESHADOWS THE END

At this point in your jiu-jitsu career, you have likely heard the argument that most white belts won't become blue belts, and most blue belts won't become purple belts, and on and on. You have probably seen this play out in your own academy as well. While we may not be able to put exact percentages to how many white belts drop out before earning their first colored belts, we can see that the biggest and most immediate retention opportunity for most academies is definitely in retaining white belts.

While some student churn is inevitable, you should always seek to lower it. Just as the sales experience begins to build customer loyalty, so too does your on-boarding process. If a student's first experiences with jiu-jitsu are riddled with stress and confusion, they are less likely to endure the parts of the jiu-jitsu journey that are truly difficult. If you can make a student's first academy experiences pleasant and productive, you can continue the momentum you built in the sales process.

That means losing fewer white belts than before, which means deepening your pool of upper belts in the long run and reaping the rewards of a larger retained student base.

Beyond How to Tie Your Belt

Most people accept that when they start a new hobby that they won't be good at it, so the majority of your new students will tolerate not knowing how to do an armbar or not knowing how to shrimp. What can cost you students, however, is putting a new student in a situation where they simply feel stupid. For example, a new student will gladly let you show him or her how to tie their belt and probably won't mind getting it wrong once or twice. If you instead hand a student their new uniform and push them toward the changing room, you risk leaving them in a room full of people they don't know, fumbling awkwardly with the new belt, doing their best to guess how it should be tied.

Those are two very different experiences, and the latter experience can create a great deal of unnecessary anxiety in your brand new customer.

If you put extra planning into how you educate a new student about your gym, they will be more likely to stay longer. Here are some ideas that you can start implementing today:

- ◆ Give new students a tour of the gym so that they know where to find everything they need
- ◆ Before you send a new student off to the changing room with a new uniform, introduce them to a friendly upper belt who will show them how to tie their belt when they come out
- ◆ Partner new students with friendly upper belts when they take their first classes, and if you allow new students to roll, give them friendly rolls as well
- ◆ Handout a new student guide or send an automated series of welcome emails that educate new students on unspoken rules like where to stand at the start and close of class, what good hygiene means, and so on
- ◆ Check in personally with new students (or ask your instructors to as well) to see if they have questions or concerns

A little bit of upfront education can help dispel the hesitations a student might have about committing to jiu-jitsu training in the long term, replacing those feelings with genuine excitement that they share with their friends and family.

Beginner Solutions to Beginner Problems

From a customer experience perspective, dropping into a mixed-levels class as a completely new grappler can be intensely frustrating, and again, this hinges on the idea that students don't necessarily mind having to learn but will mind feeling stupid. If the first class your new student takes dives into an advanced position like reverse de la Riva guard, they will leave feeling like they made no progress that day, after an hour or more of fumbling and struggling.

For this reason, many larger gyms offer beginner classes where students learn basic movements and also some self-defense. We have also seen some gyms find great success with limiting how much new students free-roll, and there are examples of extremely successful gyms adhering to strict policies on this. The reasoning is often that the feeling of getting crushed and mangled in a roll when you know very little jiu-jitsu is not fun and drives people to quit.

We don't have any hard data or a firm recommendation of whether or not you should let new students roll, but the underlying theme is valuable: Those early experiences matter. Having a class devoted to beginners is ideal, but if you don't have room on the schedule for one you could pair a new student up with an instructor during normal class time. Instead of the student learning the regular material for the day, he or she gets a semi-private lesson experience where they learn basics, from drills to some attacks.

At the same time, even if you don't restrict letting new students roll—and again, we aren't advocates of one approach over another—you will likely see better results if you give new students instructive rolls, pairing them with individuals who will coach and encourage them even though they have no idea what they're doing.

Unofficial Community Mentors

Jiu-jitsu etiquette and technique aside, the social aspects of starting a new hobby are also important to consider. For many white belts, not knowing anyone in class can be more stressful than any other facet of learning jiu-jitsu for the first time. To account for this, take a few moments to introduce a new student to other students in the class. If you make introductions to a group rather than to just one of your veteran students, you increase the chances of your new student seeing a familiar face when he or she visits again for another class.

You can also take this idea and make it slightly more official. If you have upper belts who seem like they could be potential instructors, you could talk to them about being gym mentors. They might not be ready to lead class, but if you charge the right individuals with looking after new students and pitching in when they see someone needing help, you can start to teach leadership skills and deliver a better customer experience at the same time.

You can make your mentor program as official as you like, but typically an informal conversation with your best students can deliver the results you are looking for.

3. A CULTURE OF RETENTION

Research on the importance of building a brand goes back to the 1960s. At that time, major corporations were starting to realize that as consumers had more and more options as to where they spent their money, the intangible parts of the brand experience became more important and more powerful. When people went to buy a car, they weren't just buying the car based on features and specs; they started to buy cars because of what that car represented, which is why you saw car companies like Mercedes and Volkswagen take radically different approaches to how they talked to the market.

The intangible parts of the jiu-jitsu experience you provide to students matters as well. Yes, they pay for the classes you offer and the facilities you provide, but how long they stay with your school can be influenced strongly by the kind of culture that you, your instructors, and your students come together to create.

Now, much of the beauty in jiu-jitsu comes from variations in style and expression, and culture is not immune to this. Different personalities will attract different types of student bases as they lead cultures that fit them and their leadership style. That's excellent! Our goal here is not to make every jiu-jitsu academy the same but rather to highlight some common challenges in culture that apply to nearly every school.

Friendly Faces Matter

The difficulty of stepping into a jiu-jitsu academy for the first time cannot be overstated. Someone who is brand new to the art and perhaps lacks self-confidence or athleticism—the kind of people jiu-jitsu was designed to empower—are likely to be intimidated by a sea of tough-looking faces sizing them up when they come through the door. It's stressful. It's uncomfortable. And it can make a potential student want to turn-tail and leave without ever coming back.

If you cut off those negative feelings right away, you create the kind of positive-experience momentum that keeps students coming back for more. Imagine if instead of your new student seeing a bunch of grim expressions staring him down one of your mid-level belts immediately jumps off the mat to go shake his or her hand, introducing themselves with a smile and personally leading them to one of your instructors to learn more about that school.

Instill in your students the importance of welcoming newcomers with open arms, and encourage them to be ambassadors for your school. This might take a few class announcements to get started, as well as some positive reinforcement when you see it happen (“I saw you go to greet the new guy. Thank you for doing that”), but this small gesture will make students excited to come back.

Variety is Often More Fun

Many people describe jiu-jitsu training as a grind because it’s a long journey and can be mentally and physically taxing, especially as you challenge yourself to conquer bigger and bigger obstacles. When you aim to keep students for 5, 10, or more years, don’t lose sight of the importance of shaking things up. A little bit of variety can make classes more fun, especially for the mother or father with kids and full-time careers who may not want the world champion experience of always drilling the same moves.

Here are some ways you can keep the training experience fresh for your students:

- ◆ Offer various class levels and types. Sometimes advanced students want to be able to drop into a fundamentals class for a refresher, and sometimes students want to focus on self-defense over sport. If you have different class options, students can self-select into other options when they need a change of pace.
- ◆ Vary class structure from time to time. If you follow the same pattern for instruction, don’t be afraid to experiment with something new, whether you intend to see if a different drill or structure works or you simply want to break from the norm. This could be as simple as doing a lot more rolling than you usually do.
- ◆ Invite guest instructors. You could organize a formal seminar to give students a different perspective on the art, but you can also be more casual and invite visiting upper belts to teach a few techniques when they drop by. Even impromptu experiences like this can make students feel like they got to be a part of something special by not missing class that night.

A big part of breaking the monotony is in doing things that feel authentic to you and your school. If your academy is competition focused, it may not make sense to goof off on and do a bunch of games (or perhaps it does), but it might make sense for you to run a class that mixes in strikes when your students usually roll under IBJJF rules.

Longevity Also Drives Retention

When marketing and business gurus talk about customer retention, they often lump those conversations under the category of marketing. Yes, email and social media are part of how you retain students, but our art has an additional dimension that the average business doesn't. Fashion retailers, for example, aren't losing customers to ringworm outbreaks or knee injuries.

In jiu-jitsu, when we talk about keeping students for the long-term, we have to also consider how we are contributing to their health, whether that's positive or negative. If students have to sit out from training because they are hurt or sick, you risk them never returning. This effect becomes more pronounced the farther beyond the fighter crowd you go. The father of two with a full-time job sees jiu-jitsu as a hobby and might hesitate to return to a pastime that repeatedly puts him on crutches.

Yes, some incidents are inevitable—because it is a contact sport, after all—but where we can prevent disease or injury, we have an opportunity to improve retention. Here are some points to consider:

- ◆ Clean regularly and thoroughly. Everyone knows that grappling arts are at a high risk for disease transmission, but many academies still fall short when it comes to basic cleanliness. Scrub down everything at least once a week, and mop your mats regularly. Use this time to take care of little things too: emptying garbage cans, cleaning windows, and dusting nooks and crannies.
- ◆ Educate your students about common mat infections. Part of stopping an outbreak is catching cases early, so if you make your students feel comfortable about coming to you when they've had an infection (even if they're embarrassed), you can stop one infection from turning into 50.

- ◆ Talk about basic hygiene frequently, which should include everything from wearing a clean uniform to avoiding cross contamination (don't leave one workout at one gym and then come to the academy without showering) to not training when you have an illness.
- ◆ Encourage all students to roll with control and talk to those who don't. Highly technical students can roll hard without injury, but be on the lookout for hard-rollers who do not have the technique to back it up. The initial conversation might be awkward, but it could save your gym from having to respond to a serious injury.
- ◆ Pair students up with safe rolling experiences. As your student base expands, you will see more non-athletes on your mat, which is a great sign for your gym but can become problematic. The 58-year-old white belt might be at risk if she is paired with the super aggressive teen blue belt. Varying match-ups are not necessarily bad, but a mind toward prevention can stop problems before they start.
- ◆ Review your warm-up practices. Some traditional stretches and exercises might be outright bad for your students. If something looks or feels extreme, consider talking to an expert about it to spare your students some potentially harmful strain.

When you start to take ownership for your student's health, you will see an almost immediate reduction in injuries and infections.

Reinforcing Positive Reinforcement

Many of the traditional martial arts started with belt systems not unlike what we have in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, but as the business side of those arts grew in prominence, gym owners recognized that they could use promotions to keep their students engaged. What may have started as a wholly sincere effort to help more people enjoy martial arts morphed into a complicated web of certifications and an ever-growing list of belt colors, with some organizations even using camouflage belts.

While we believe in the value of the belt system to help students visualize their own progress, we don't want to see the sport lose sight of what rank is meant to mean, which is why this key idea is worth repeating: You can get an impact similar to that of a promotion without promoting a student.

A promotion gives a student the positive following rewards (which can keep them coming back to get more of those rewards):

- ▶ A sense of accomplishment
- ▶ Feeling as though they are improving and getting better
- ▶ Recognition in front of their peers
- ▶ An affirmation that their instructor, someone whom they deeply respect, notices and cares about them

But you don't have to hand out a stripe or a belt to give a student that same experience. A compliment when you see them working hard in class, or a small aside to say thank you when you notice them helping a newcomer, or an end-of-class shout out before you dismiss everyone—All of these things can reinforce a student's desire to train. And though you might not realize it, an extra kind word could help a student break out of a training rut.

4. MARKETING FOR RETENTION

Though we typically view marketing as a way to acquire new students—similar to how we view the sales conversation we discussed earlier—the way your academy talks to the outside world can help you to keep more students on your mats. Modern marketing is often described as a conversation, which implies that customers and prospects talk and also suggests that more than one person might be involved in any given dialog.

Think about it: When you consider buying a new product or service, you might ask your friends or look up reviews. The brand in question plays a role, but other people are contributing their voices as well to help you make a decision. When you run an academy, you could have 100 or more individual voices speaking on your behalf to their friends and family about your business, and how you manage your marketing can harness that momentum to benefit current as well as incoming students.

Truly Social Media

Many academy owners look at social media as a new student acquisition tool. Social media can be a source of new business, yes, but the extreme competitiveness of social media platforms has made this sort of business activity pay-to-play. If you aren't investing in Facebook advertising, for example, your average message probably will not go far beyond your existing student base. For our purposes, however, that's perfectly okay. If you approach your social media as a retention tool first and a new student source second, you can not only keep more of the students you have but also drive more high-quality referrals.

Here's how:

1. Think of your social media presence as an extension of the in-academy experience. A student might not be able to make it to every class, but if you stay active on social media, you can make him or her feel connected even if being physically present is not possible.

2. Take and share photos of happy students, tagging as many of your students as you can so that it appears in their feeds and motivates them to share the photos with their own friends.
3. Use your social media to highlight student accomplishments, and that means more than just competition. Promotions are great social media material, but so far are simple shout-outs for a student who works really hard.
4. Film some short instructional videos and share them. This is a great way to highlight what you are covering in class that week and to add additional depth to material you might not usually get to teach in a class.
5. Regularly request student testimonials and online reviews (Google+ and Facebook).
6. At a minimum, try to share two student photos a week.
7. Before you share media featuring students, make sure that you have permission and have signed media release forms for everyone involved, especially if you are taking photos of children.

Building a consistently active and high-quality social media presence takes work, but when it's done properly, it amplifies the feeling of being a part of something special, and that's hard to walk away from.

Retention in Your Inbox

Some marketing experts argue that email is another form of social media, and we agree. Email is another low-cost way to add an extra touchpoint to your dynamic with a student, strengthening the bond he or she has with the academy and keeping them engaged with their training. We will talk a bit more about how you can automate follow-up with students based on specific triggers (like attendance or anniversaries), and we talked previously about how you can use email to help on-board new students, but what about the in-between?

A monthly newsletter is a straightforward way to extend your academy’s culture beyond the walls of the school. To be effective, though, you need powerful content. Instead of trying to improvise a new format each month, mix and match from this checklist:

- ▶ A personal message from you, the instructor
- ▶ A student highlight (with a photo) celebrating an accomplishment inside or outside of the gym
- ▶ Reminders about upcoming academy events or schedule changes (like holiday hours)
- ▶ A link to a recent video you made
- ▶ A sneak preview of what material classes will cover that month
- ▶ A preview and a link to a new blog post on your website (you probably have some aspiring jiu-jitsu writers on your mats who would love to help!)

Remember, your goal is to keep students engaged and to inspire a student who might be losing interest to get back in the swing of regular training. An email might not seem a lot, but every nudge counts.

Special Events for Special Occasions

With a little bit of creativity, you can use special events to serve dual purposes: Attracting new students and retaining existing students. These events can be big and small—not all of them have to be grand spectacles that require months of planning and a few thousand dollars to market—and you can use them to cater to the range of audiences you serve with your academy (and not all of them have to be for everyone, every time).

When you run an event, your students get to feel like the cool folks who are “in the know.” They’ve been at the academy for a while, and they not only get to experience the event themselves, but they also get to be the kind of person who invites their friends and family to something fun and unique. Both of those feelings are powerful ways to keep a student engaged with your academy.

The types of events you run will likely depend on your academy culture and teaching style, but here are some formats you can easily adapt to suit you:

- ◆ **Bully Prevention**—Run this event right before school starts. Make it open to the public, and give the students in your kid’s classes special invitations that they can give to their friends. You might consider partnering with a local school district or police station to promote the event.

- ◆ **Women’s Self-Defense**—A women-only event is a way to lower the intimidation factor of stepping into a gym, and it gives you an opportunity to serve a very specific audience. Again, consider partnering with relevant groups in your area to raise awareness.

- ◆ **Self-Defense Week**—Do you typically teach sport jiu-jitsu and aren’t sure if your students would be interested in a regular self-defense class? Dedicate a week to self-defense training and mix in everything



- ◆ **Train with Mom and Dad**—Dedicate a kid’s class to a format where parents are welcome to come train with their kids. Mom and Dad get to try something new, and the child gets to experience what it’s like to teach someone the art they love.

- ◆ **Charity Training**—Grapplethons are now incredibly popular, and with the added dynamic of being able to solicit sponsors, you can empower students to promote your event to others and do some real good in the process.

- ◆ **A Night on the Town**—Big fight coming up? Invite your students out for wings to watch the event and encourage everyone to wear gym t-shirts when they go. Bonding off the mat can be a lot of fun and carryover to experiences on the mat.

In addition to these public-friendly events, you can also incorporate more traditional jiu-jitsu events like seminars, in-house tournaments, or competitions to keep the academy experience active and varied.

5. CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

Often shortened to “CRM,” a customer relationship management system is a software platform that helps you simplify many of the day-to-day operations in your gym that would otherwise need to be done by hand. Most academy owners are using one already, but even if you have a CRM, you are probably not taking advantage of multiple core features that can make your work easier and actually improve the student experience.

To start, we should note that many of the suggestions we’ve made already could have a CRM tie-in. For example, email communications you have with your students can likely be automated and delivered via your CRM. Though many CRM features are similar from platform to platform, the technical implementation will vary, so take advantage of your CRM support line. Ask questions. Take training. There is a lot of potential right at your fingertips.

In addition to the recommendations we have already made, you should use your CRM to do the following:

1. Automate attendance tracking and attendance alerts. Instead of manually logging who comes to what class, use a card scanning system so that you can easily track the performance of classes and the engagement of individual students. If one class is more popular than another, find out why. You might uncover an opportunity to expand the magic or to solve a problem in your less frequented classes.
2. If a student suddenly starts missing classes, use an automated alert to prompt you to check in. In many cases, life is simply getting in the way, but the fact that you noticed the student’s absence will be memorable and will increase loyalty. In the event that the student is losing interest, you can find out why and offer encouragement.
3. Set up alerts ahead of contract expirations. While we aren’t advocates of marketing solely around contract expirations, checking in on a student around the time they are trying to decide if they should renew or not is a good time to revisit the conversation you had when they first started. What did they want out of training? What can you do to help?

4. Eliminate uncomfortable billing conversations. When you use your CRM to handle automatic student payments, you don't have to chase students down for payments or hit them up for a double payment when you forget for a month. Though the bank account experience is the same, the academy experience is simplified to being just about training.
5. Start to monitor key metrics like cost per acquisition (CPA, or how much you have to spend to get a new customer) and total lifetime value (TLV, or how much a student spends with you during an average membership length). You might not need those metrics now, but setting your system up to account for them can give you powerful data for later.

Next Steps from the JJGF

As you work to implement these suggestions into your academy—taking them slow, addressing one or two at a time—stay engaged with the Jiu-Jitsu Global Federation. Our community of academy owners and instructors is here to help, and each month we share new insights from the JJGF and from its members. Running an academy is hard work, but you are doing good in the world by spreading jiu-jitsu. We're here to support you and will continue to share our knowledge and learning.

BECOME A JJGF MEMBER TODAY