

Revoking a Membership without Getting Sued

By Ken Reinig

Solution: Management

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One of the most frequently asked questions by my clients, other than, “How do I save money on my insurance renewal?” is “How do I get rid of a problem member?” In this day and age of political correctness and threats of discrimination, a club owner is sometimes apprehensive about telling a member that they are no longer welcome in the club. Let’s face it; we all have problem members that we wish would have joined another club rather than our club. At some point in your careers, you will have to deal with a problem member. Some of you may be dealing with these members in your clubs right now. There is an old customer service rule that says if a customer complains to you about one of the other members, there are 12 others who are feeling the same way. The others just aren’t telling you. The bottom line is that problem members cost you business and increase your liability exposure. Life is too short to put up with these types of members, so it’s time to say goodbye.

Every club needs to establish their own niche or atmosphere. This begins by developing your specific club policies and guidelines. The club also creates their own mission statement and shares these goals and guidelines with every staff member. Having guidelines that clearly outline what is expected of the member can go a long way to enhancing the quality of your club. Members should be given these policies and guidelines during their first tour. It demonstrates that you care about your club’s workout environment and it also reflects your pride in ownership. Here are a few suggested bullet points that could be included in your own club policies and guidelines:

- Appropriate athletic shoes only. No street shoes, boots, or sandals are allowed in workout areas.
- Shorts, sweat pants, T-shirts, tank-tops, and Spandex clothing accessories deemed appropriate by management.
- Clean workout clothing is required. Any unsatisfactory hygiene condition will be addressed by management and corrective action may be required.
- All other clothing and shoes must be kept in lockers. Please keep all valuables at home. We are not responsible for any lost or stolen items.
- Please be courteous at all times.
- Rack all weights after each use.
- Please do not “slam” or drop weights.
- Allow others to “work in” during your rest periods.
- Keep hands and feet away from all moving parts and weight stacks.
- Do not attempt to repair or adjust any equipment that has malfunctioned.
- Report any equipment problem immediately to the staff.
- Use your workout towel to wipe off equipment and benches after use.
- Derogatory remarks involving any other member or club personnel will not be permitted.

There are several other points you may want to include, but I think you get the idea of what we are trying to accomplish. Once you establish a written set of guidelines, you have a basis, or reference point, for discussion with any member who elects not to follow your club's rules.

Generally speaking, a member who does not comply with your guidelines is given the old "three strikes and your out." The first meeting would be with you, or your manager, and the member, one-on-one, to point out the violation.

And, you might say, "Tom, we really appreciate you as a member. However, we have had complaints about your personal hygiene. Please wear clean workout clothing when you come to the gym." Tom will appreciate your discretion and probably take care of the problem immediately. If he doesn't, the next step would be to have a written violation report drawn up that indicates he has been warned twice about his condition and that he needs to change or leave. The next time Tom comes in smelling like four-day-old fish stew, he's gone.

Issues involving sexual harassment, drug use, or fighting need no warning or second chance. Ask the member to leave immediately and call the police if necessary. As with any membership cancellation generated by you, be sure to immediately refund any unearned portion of that member's agreement and training package.

The bottom line is that you have the right to refuse service to anyone as long as you are not violating their civil rights, gender, religious beliefs, race, or any disabilities. By taking control of your gym, you can create the atmosphere you have always wanted. If you don't have a written set of club policies and guidelines, now is the time to sit down with your key staff members and provide them with the standards of professionalism you expect in your club. By following a written set of guidelines, you will also find that your employees will become more effective in their relationships with all of your members.

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