

How to properly market your ball machine

by Stan Oley, USPTA

Creating a “ball machine club”

What is a ball machine club, you ask? In my experience, this is the most effective way to generate revenue from the machine.

Until recently, the most common method of renting the ball machine has been the pay-to-play program, whereby the customer pays a fee to train with the ball machine on a time-incremental basis. Customers spend money each time they train with the machine, causing them to budget their usage. This means the customer uses the ball machine less and fails to realize the benefits the machine can provide. However, the pay-to-play program still works well in resort areas where customers cannot always find a game. In this situation, the customer who cannot find a game is usually on vacation and does not mind paying a fee to work out on the ball machine.

By establishing a successful ball machine club program, you can increase service to your customers and increase revenue.

With a ball machine club, customers purchase a pass to use the machine on an unlimited basis, giving them access to the ball machine more frequently without having to pay a per-usage charge. Once they have purchased a pass, it is up to them to try to utilize the machine as much as possible so that they can get the most from their investment.

The main problem that has existed with creating a ball machine club is the proper organization and ongoing marketing of such a club. This article serves as a guide to successfully organizing and marketing a ball machine club at your facility.



A demo day, showcasing the value of the ball machine, is the best method for organizing a ball machine club.



The positioning of the machine during usage is critical to the player's training.

Organizing the ball machine club

First, a demo day, showcasing the value of the ball machine, is the best method for organizing a ball machine club. This demo day should be used as a vehicle for selling ball machine club passes. It is best for a ball machine representative to run the demo day because that person usually has been factory-trained on how to give such a presentation and properly showcase the ball machine to the membership. It is very important that you market the demo day well so you can ensure that as many of your members attend as possible.

The following is a sample ball machine club that I have designed utilizing the four most common styles of ball machine club passes: the platinum charter membership card, the gold one-year membership card, the frequent user punch card, and the complimentary daily pass.

The platinum charter membership card – This card represents the most valuable customer, the charter or original ball machine club member. I suggest that you limit the spaces for the charter membership to guarantee its exclusivity. I also suggest that the platinum card member receive a two-year membership in the ball machine club for the price of one. Any subsequent years should be at this special pricing. Suggested price: \$200, two-year single membership,* or \$250 for a two-year family membership with a \$25 additional charge for each person above three family members.*

The gold one-year membership card – This card is offered once the platinum charter membership is filled to capacity. It represents a standard one-year membership in the ball machine club. Suggested price: \$125 per year for a single membership* or \$150 per year for a family membership with a \$25 additional charge for each person above three family members.*

The frequent user punch card – This card is for the frequent ball machine user who does not wish to purchase a ball machine club membership. Also, this card fills the void for customers who are only looking to use the machine a limited number of times but want a good value. Many times a customer is focusing on an aspect of his or her game or is only in town for a limited period of time and cannot reap the benefits of a yearlong membership. Each punch

should represent a normal usage increment. Suggested price: 10 punches for \$100.*

The complimentary daily pass – This card should be used as a vehicle for selling ball machine club memberships to customers in the lesson program or to people who have never trained on the ball machine. After a lesson or when someone inquires about the ball machine club, offer that person a complimentary pass to try the machine. At this time it is important that you explain the benefits of joining the ball machine club.

** Pricing is based on the pay-to-play program pricing of \$15 per hour.*

The ball machine prescription

When people are ill they seek a physician who, based on their medical history and illness, prescribes a remedy. After patients have taken the prescribed remedy for a period of time, they return to the doctor for a checkup to ensure they are on the road to recovery. Tennis instructors should view their profession in a similar way. Customers come to the instructor with a failure in their game that they wish to correct. The instructor provides a solution to the customer during the lesson, which usually has some noticeable results. However, the customer is not well yet! This is when the instructor should give the customer a ball machine prescription along with a complimentary ball machine pass to utilize in preparation for the next lesson. Then, as part of the lesson plan, review the ball machine drill prescribed at the next lesson and provide any assistance necessary. A player who takes one lesson a week should have two hours of ball machine homework before the next lesson and one hour of homework if taking two lessons a week.

Ball machine club makers and breakers

Now that you understand that the ball machine club can be a great source of revenue at your facility, there are some considerations that can make or break the program. Consider the following factors before you organize your ball machine club:

Instructor involvement – The biggest ball machine breaker is when the instructor has no involvement with the ball machine club or is not sharing in the machine revenue. It is always best for the instruc-

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tor to purchase the machine or have the club loan the instructor the funds necessary for the purchase at a reasonable interest rate.

Owner greed – Owner greed can also create a negative experience when organizing a ball machine club. Many times the prospective owner of the ball machine realizes the revenue potential of having a ball machine club but purchases a low-quality machine with few features. The owner will usually have a large ball machine club the first year. However, many people fail to use the machine because of its limited features or reap the benefits of their investment. Consequently, most of the customers fail to renew their ball machine club memberships the second year.

Record keeping – It is very important to be organized with your ball machine club data. Keeping up-to-date records for both the membership and the maintenance of the machine is particularly important in providing first-class service to the ball machine club member. If a member were to lose his card it is very important that all the necessary information has been documented at the point of sale so that a new card can be reissued immediately. Also, it is important to document all maintenance requests along with a record of service performed on the machine. Proper documentation will also allow you to know where your ball machine's remote control is at all times.

Dead balls – Dead balls in the ball machine will discourage customers from using the equipment. If the tennis programs do not provide enough turnover of fresh balls for the machine, I strongly recommend that you use pressureless tennis balls. The pressureless tennis balls should last five to six times longer than normal balls while never losing their bounce characteristic.

Access – The machine must be set up and ready for operation before the customer arrives. If customers have to wait or set up the machine themselves then they usually do not view the ball machine as such a positive experience. Also, a tangled extension cord can cause the customer a lot of frustration. It is very important to always keep the extension cord on a reel so that customers can move the machine freely around the court during its use.

Promoting after the lesson – Lack of promoting the ball machine as part of the post-lesson curriculum and ineffective use of the complimentary passes will result in failure to recruit and retain members in the ball machine club.

Using the ball machine in a “game-simulated” environment

The following tips should help your customers get optimal value when training on the ball machine:

- Always program the ball machine to throw a ball that is “game-simulated” in terms of its characteristics.
- Select target areas that represent those that players would hit in a game based on both the incoming ball characteristics and the outgoing shot selection. Players should achieve success hitting their target area 70 percent of the time. If the target area is hit too easily, then shrink the target area first before increasing the

difficulty of the ball characteristics. Target areas should vary in size and shape according to the shot being hit and the player's skill level.

- It is very important that the ball frequency is also “game-simulated.” The ball frequency should be set so that when the player's returned ball passes the machine opening, another ball is thrown.
- The positioning of the machine during usage is also critical to the player's training. Always position the machine in a spot where an opponent would be hitting from in a match situation. This will help enhance the player's ball recognition skills and make the training more “game-simulated” because the angles in practice will be the same as the match.

Tips for teaching with the ball machine

When teaching with the machine, make the sessions progressive by changing drills every five to 10 minutes, depending on the student's success. The following would be a normal drill progression:

- Hit balls off of machine with specific characteristics, working on technique for that shot with no player movement (what I like to call practicing with training wheels still on).
- Hit balls off of machine with specific characteristics, working on technique for that shot with normal player movement expected for the shot (training wheels are now off).
- Hit the same ball utilizing an appropriate target area. Vary target areas to gain versatility with those incoming ball characteristics, i.e., some players only train on crosscourt passing shots because that is what they do best, however, it is equally important to practice down the line, etc. Remember, champions are those who practice what they do not do well.
- Addition of the pro acting as an opponent to create an even more “game-simulated” environment, i.e., if the player is practicing a high approach shot, stand behind the machine and move just before the player hits the approach so that the student learns to hit to the open court away from a live player.
- Live-ball drilling.

In summary

By establishing a successful ball machine club program, you can achieve two things: increased service to your customers and increased revenue. Anytime you can accomplish these two goals with one program, you are working to benefit everyone involved. Good luck! 🎾



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