



Roundtable Forum on Growing Your Dojo
June 24, 2014

We had four speakers to start the forum: Fran Turner (Toronto), Dan Jones (Calgary), Amanda Laurick (Seattle), and Mike Chin (Victoria). Audience members added comments and suggestions later.

Fran Turner said their dojo has a couple of strategies to get new beginners. The first Tuesday of each month, they invite beginners for free. Sometimes they get 4 or 5 people, sometimes no one. Three times a year, her dojo offers a free three-hour introductory workshop. In addition, they offer basics classes. Fran said that her dojo has worked hard to have a really good website. Everyone comes through the website now, though flyers worked for the kids' class. The dojo marketing committee uses Facebook and Twitter and puts up posters twice a year. Since the dojo is on a very busy street, they have a sandwich board placed outside the dojo. Currently the dojo membership is pretty stable. If everyone came at once, they would have 50 members.

With regard to retention, Fran said it's important to have a really supportive atmosphere in the dojo. Ask how students are doing, get them to introduce themselves at the end of class, and be encouraging. Often it is not the adept students that become core members of the club; it can often be the ones that seem slow and clumsy. Another way to encourage people is to get them involved as board members of the non-profit dojo organization.

Fran said that their instructional committee meets every six weeks. They have monthly themes: posture, ukemi, footwork, etc. The committee reviews student progress. Her dojo has a 3,2,1 program. For those testing for 1, 2 and 3 kyu, they have to put in a certain number of hours doing dojo work (e.g. cleaning, teaching kids, etc.). This also helps with retention, to make students feel involved with the dojo.

Mike Chin said that his adult membership numbers are dropping. Older students develop health problems and drop out. Once a student has a family; they have trouble getting to the dojo. Parents make a choice; if they can only afford one family member practicing Aikido, they will pay for their children. Mike's children's classes are big.

Mike's neighbourhood has changed substantially. Once James Bay was known for drug addicts and prostitution; now it is chic and expensive. Thirty-five percent of the students walk to the dojo. In Victoria, you have to know the area you are in before you decide how to advertise. Mike was able to get one-year of free advertising, but only one person showed up as a result. Mike asked his students what is best for advertising. They said that newspapers are only good for demonstrations. Internet is the most effective advertising tool.

To attract new members, Mike has an Open House on the first Tuesday of every month. He prints out cards that say, "Mike Chin would like to invite you to join us for a class on _____." The card has the club logo, phone number and address. Usually 2 or 3 people show up. The best advertising is word of mouth from existing dojo members. To take advantage of that, Mike has "bring a friend" the first Tuesday of the month. The guests get to throw, not get thrown. That way they get exposure to Aikido without the fear of falling, which might put newcomers off.

Dan Jones said that his dojo runs adult introduction courses for beginners, but they were not advancing to regular classes. So they started to bring that class into combined beginner/regular classes. Senior students rotate through the beginners, then invite them to join regular classes if they have the aptitude and/or interest. They are not required to get a uniform. Adults are encouraged to sit and watch a class before they try it.

In Alberta, school programs have a Physical Education component, which can be met by doing Aikido. This has helped increase the children's classes at Dan's dojo. Many adults has come because of the kids; parents are welcomed as helpers. Dan partnered with Girl's Sport to get more girls into Aikido. He said t was important to get information to parents about what Aikido is and to emphasize its non-competitive aspect. Kids are welcome to try a class; they are paired with a senior student. Dan said the kids love it when the head instructor comes in to their class and teaches black belt techniques. It introduces the harder, more serious and fear-inducing side of Aikido, which helps the kids progress.

Amanda said that they work hard on creating a friendly atmosphere. Beginners must pay for 2 months when they start, but that includes a uniform. Her dojo has switched to rolling admission. Currently the Seattle dojo has 50 adults and 20 kids. Amanda said that they tend to lose kids when they hit 13. Her dojo has a monthly game night and have social waza. They are thinking of doing a wine and cheese night; that would be a social with someone showing techniques. None of their advertising has been a great success. Word of mouth is the best advertising, it seems.

Amanda said that they identify students who are really keen. These students become the deshi group who do heavy-duty tasks around the dojo. Amanda said that the dojo has adopted an automatic dues program. Parents of kids love it. You pay in advance and therefore, you come to class more regularly. Amanda said it is super-easy to administer. Students can still give a cheque but most prefer the auto-pay.

Jennifer Henis (New York) said that their dojo started automatic payment also. There were lots of inactive members. With the automatic payment, they don't have members who come one month and not the next; attendance is much more steady.

Liz said that VWA adopted an Introduction to Aikido program developed by Ivan Booth of Memorial University in Newfoundland and inspired by Fran Turner's programs. The program of 6 classes for \$40 resulted in many new members for the dojo. There is a set curriculum and the program is offered in Jan. and Sept. VWA also emails former students twice a year to keep in touch and calls students by phone if they haven't been at the dojo for a while. The personal touch. These don't always bring people back, but the dojo receives feedback and maintains its personal/friendly/family brand in the community.

Tony Leong (Victoria) said that their best marketing result came from a newspaper interview in the Life section with a big picture and an article about him and Mike Chin. They also got newspaper coverage when Doshu was visiting. Once they got a 3 minute TV spot with Mark Chin and Hilary Dawson demonstrating. Tony suggests approaching local papers and free community bulletins to offer articles. He said they use the following wording, "Try Aikido a non-competitive martial art that incorporates yoga, chigong and flexibility."

Douglas Mathieu reported that the Canadian Aikido Federation is working on marketing Aikido on two levels: one is global brand awareness (e.g. Aikido over Judo); and the other is a local focus, the dojo knows its community and neighbourhood best. Hugh Stephens said that a template for all dojos that tells what Aikido is all about would be excellent; then local dojos can put in their logo and contact information.

Douglas noted that many dojos are submitting kyu promotions very regularly, some every month. If dojo members go too long without promotion, they can get discouraged. He said it is better for retention to have set test times to ensure interest keeps going. Students will come more often and prepare themselves for promotion. Douglas said that Hombu has a regular test schedule.

Discussion Moderated and Minutes Taken by
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