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P2PTrainer: discovering how to better connect personal trainers to clients.

Project Overview

Personal training is a field that is familiar to most people in society but is still mostly misunderstood. One great example can be found in television shows like *The Biggest Loser*. The show gives us awe-inspiring stories of men and women whose lives have been permanently changed in part by personal trainers. Each episode is wrought with the intensity of the workouts, the forcefulness of the trainers, and the emotionality of the contestants. We see episodes where Jillian Michaels yells and screams at the contestants to get every ounce of effort from them. We see contestants throw up because of the sheer difficulty of the workouts they go through. At the end of the week, we watch a dramatic weigh-in where the world can see who lost the most percentage body weight. A contestant could work out hard and still be sent home, not good enough to move to the next round.

Unfortunately, there are many people who view personal training as depicted by *The Biggest Loser*. The only way a person could lose weight is to block off six months of their life, get yelled at multiple people at a time, workout until they pass out, and then maybe they can lose weight as long as they make the cut for the next week. The truth is that personal trainers are trained to tailor one's exercise regimen to the person that they are training. In addition, there are a variety of styles and ways of training a person that match with any potential client. So the question is not whether someone is "tough

enough” to lose weight, but rather how can we better match the right personal trainer with the right client?

There are several different aspects to consider when matching personal trainers with clients: availability, training style, location, goals, and even knowledge of physical injuries could be necessary to be the right personal trainer for someone. The P2PTrainer project aims to discover the pieces of information about a trainer that is critical to help potential clients find the right trainer. We first gained insights through first hand interviews and observations. We then take those insights to create digital artifacts that we employ in a web application that allows users to search and find the right personal trainer for them. Each digital artifact went through multiple rounds of user testing and brainstorming to further refine their effectiveness. The end result is a web application that provides more information about a trainer than what is in the market today.

Our Process

To discover how to create an effective web application that helps match personal trainers, we went through an iterative design process that involves interviews, observation, and several rounds of user testing. Here are the steps that we have taken in creating P2PTrainer:

- 1. Interviews with personal trainers.** We interviewed eight personal trainers of various experience levels and expertise. We asked questions to determine more information about the way that they train client, what are the attributes of their ideal client, and how do they record the results of their clients. We analyze the

results of these interviews to see if there are descriptive characteristics where we can group personal trainers. These groupings help us create digital artifacts that enable potential clients divine insights about the trainer that they couldn't get from only a picture and a bio.

We looked for personal trainers of varying levels of experience: from those starting out to some that have more than 30 years of experience. We focused on personal trainers that have worked near a major city and that have done 1 on 1 training sessions in the past. Since P2PTrainer is initially interested in matching the right personal trainer with the right client, we wanted to tackle the 1 on 1 interaction first before extending to group sessions and classes in the future.

- 2. Interviews with clients that have used personal trainers.** We interviewed six people who either has in the past or currently have a personal trainer. We asked questions to find out how they found their personal trainers and why did they choose the personal trainer that they used. We also look to determine how they were trained and what they liked and didn't like about the workouts. Lastly we delve into the relationship between the client and the trainer. What was the most important aspect in choosing a personal trainer?

We looked for clients that have recently used a personal trainer within a major city. We focused on their interactions with a personal trainer 1 on 1, but also talked about their group class experiences as well to compare and contrast.

We also tried to get clients that sought a personal trainer for an assortment of reasons.

- 3. Observations of live 1 on 1 personal trainer sessions.** We were able to observe two 1 on 1 training sessions to see first hand how trainers interact with clients, particularly looking for training styles and their client's reaction. Observation gives a live look on what happens during a personal training session and how a good relationship (or bad) between a personal trainer and a client looks like. We also had the opportunity to talk to both parties to see what each of them thinks.

We looked for a personal trainer / client pair to have been working out together for more than a few months and that already have gotten along with each other. We also tried to find trainers with different styles from each other so that we can see how a good trainer/client relationship looks like in different formats.

- 4. Compilation of key findings and creation of initial digital artifacts.** Using the information that we have gained from our interviews and observation sessions, we created two digital artifacts and made a number of design decisions that have influenced our web application. We arrived at this by first creating affinity diagrams based on our notes from our interviews and observations, and then drafting up potential digital artifacts based on the insights from the categories we discovered during the brainstorming session.
- 5. Usability testing of digital artifacts and other design decisions.** We conducted a number of rounds of user testing on our digital artifacts to determine if potential

clients could glean information from these artifacts easily. We also tested them with personal trainers to determine whether the artifact explains a part of who they are as a trainer. For trainers, we asked them to describe themselves using a paper prototype of the digital artifact that we created to see if they could express themselves through the artifact. For clients, we created paper versions of the digital artifact that represent a fictional trainer and ask the potential client whether they could describe the personal trainer and whether they would train with him or her.

- 6. Implementation of our final version of digital artifacts.** We decided upon a final version of our digital artifacts and implemented them on the website. We also incorporate other design decisions that came out during our interviews and observations to create a complete web application.

Key Findings from Interviews and Observations

Many trainers see themselves as teachers rather than trainers. The popular concept of personal trainers being only weight loss specialists is emphatically not shared by the trainers themselves. An interview with Alicia Mai, a personal trainer and strength assistant coach in New York City explains how there are two different kinds of trainers: teachers and salespeople.¹ There is a general disdain for trainers that focus more on selling training packages and sessions and not about client education and outcomes. Emory Moore Jr., a exercise teacher with more than thirty years of experience talks

¹ Face to Face Interview with Alicia Mai, NYC personal trainer

about how he doesn't like the word trainer and prefers the concept of "teachers" because the goal is to help clients learn more about how to take care of themselves and their bodies.²

Trainers with a relaxed and flexible style can be just as effective as trainers with a stern and "by the book" style. We interviewed a number of trainers that exhibited the stern training style: they prefer to formulate their workout before the session and stick to that format throughout the session. If their client does not seem to be excited about that, then in some cases the trainer will "fire" the client. For example trainers like Nathan Ng, a certified strength and conditioning coach told us that if his client drags on a workout session without motivation, he would cut the session short.³ Other trainers agreed with that assessment: Phong Le, a CrossFit instructor, said that he would pass off clients to other trainers if he feels he's not getting them results or they are not putting in the effort.⁴ These trainers have successful careers in personal training and have trained dozens of clients, so we can infer that there must be a population of people that prefer being trained in this way.

We also were able to observe the success of this kind of relationship firsthand. In our observations with Mickheila Jasmin and her personal trainer, we noticed that the trainer came to the session with a specific regimen that was non-negotiable. However

² Telephone Interview with Emory Moore Jr., Personal Trainer for 30+ years

³ Face to face interview with Nathan Ng, Crossfit Trainer in the Bay Area

⁴ Telephone Interview with Phong Le, Personal Trainer in the Bay Area

Mickheila told us how much she appreciates that style, since she isn't coming with a lot of experience training with weights and wanted to learn from a trainer's expertise.⁵

However we also interviewed clients and trainers that prefer and train with a more relaxed training style, which could involve dialogue during the workout that could change the composition of the current workout. Ayelette Robinson, a personal trainer first starting in the Bay Area, says that she sees every client as their own project and will change styles dependent on the client that she is training. Ayelette also mentioned how she isn't too selective with clients because she's willing to mold her approach dependent on the temperament of the client.⁶ In addition Prabha Matta, a client that has been trained by both strict and relaxed teachers, have experienced success with both. The dance class that she took was taught by Jason Britton, an instructor with significant dance and yoga instruction experience. Prabha emphasizes how Jason has a relaxed and flexible nature, using repetition of dance moves in an encouraging manner to get his students to learn the dance moves.⁷ This combination of patience and repetition was very effective for his clients without having to run a strict training session.

Punctuality and availability is a critical part of potential clients decision process in selecting a trainer. We have interviewed many clients that emphatically expressed how important it is to have a personal trainer that is on time and that exhibits

⁵ Telephone Interview with Mickheila Jasmin, client in Los Angeles

⁶ Telephone Interview with Ayelette Robinson, Bay Area Trainer

⁷ Face to Face Interview with Prabha Matta, current client of personal trainers

professionalism throughout the relationship. Mary Hodder, a client in the Bay Area whose personal trainer actually lives in the Midwest, established an online training arrangement using Skype. She does this primarily to keep working with her personal trainer after her move, but also because it further ensures that trainers will be on time.⁸ Cutting out the risks of transportation increases the ease and rate that a trainer will be on time. Isha Dandavate, a client that trained with a trainer in the past, explained how even though her personal trainer was great and she learned a lot from him, his lack of professionalism soured the relationship to the point that she broke off the relationship. The trainer would cancel workouts without adequate notification, and classes would be cut short on a regular basis. Rescheduling missed workouts also proved to be a problem.⁹

Potential clients also consider a trainer's physical shape when looking for a trainer.

Both trainers and clients outline the importance of a trainer's fitness level and body type in demonstrating clients that they know what they are doing. Sandra Tran, another client that recently signed up to a long term package for personal training sums it up very succinctly: "... I don't want a trainer who doesn't look physically fit him/herself. That'd be like join got a dentist who has crooked teeth/bad breath. I need to be sold that it worked for him/her, so that I can strive to see changes in myself."¹⁰ Unfair or not, personal trainers are judged by their looks to determine their effectiveness. Several of

⁸ Telephone Interview with Mary Hodder, client in the Bay Area

⁹ Face to Face Interview with Isha Dandavate, client in the Bay Area

¹⁰ Telephone Interview with Sandra Tran, client in the Bay Area

the trainers we interviewed intentionally made moves in order to get the six-pack or the bulging muscles necessary to attract the clients that they are looking for.

Many clients and trainers place a high importance of learning the right way of doing exercise. Many of the trainers emphasize the importance of form when executing exercises. Alicia Mai mentioned several times how much injury that can be prevented by focusing on the form of the exercise. What was somewhat surprising is that many of the clients we interviewed were very adamant about finding a trainer that focuses on form. Mary Hodder was very concerned with the form of her exercises so that she could prevent preexisting injuries from getting worse. Her trainer tailored her workout regimen to accommodate for her preexisting injuries, showing great flexibility and knowledge.¹¹ Isha Dandavate wanted to learn how to lift weights correctly since she didn't have experience before.¹² Mickheila Jasmin mentioned how she relied on her trainer to show her the right way of doing things so that she wouldn't injure herself.¹³ This skillset of teaching great form and designing workouts that incorporate the health and body of a client is very important and desirable.

Certifications are a major point of confusion to clients and evoke mixed feelings from personal trainers. All of the trainers we interviewed either have one or more certifications or are currently working towards one. However there is a lot of disparity

¹¹ Telephone Interview with Mary Hodder, client in the Bay Area

¹² Telephone Interview with Isha Dandavate, client in the Bay Area

¹³ Telephone Interview with Mickheila Jasmin, client in Los Angeles

between the value of these certifications in determining the skills of a personal trainer. In some cases, they are necessary to practice a specific craft. Ayelette Robinson has completed 400 hours of observations and teaching in order to obtain her Yoga instructor certification.¹⁴ However, we found some serious objections and criticism to the current system of certifications. Emory Moore spoke out about the ACE certification, one the nationally accredited certifications. He mentioned how you can take the test three times, it requires no prerequisite experience nor education and no practical exam, it is all multiple choice, and you only need 60% to pass.¹⁵ A person that passes that sort of exam could technically have no idea how to actually train someone despite the certification. None of the clients that we have interviewed had any working knowledge of the different certifications and could differentiate one from another.

Creation of the Digital Artifacts

After analyzing the interviews and observations that we gathered, we came up with two major digital artifacts that aim to give clients a unique visualization of data that would help them select a trainer that are a better fit. We also came out with a number of guidelines that has informed our website design in order to better provide the information clients are looking for to make an informed decision in selecting a new personal trainer.

¹⁴ Interview with Ayelette Robinson

¹⁵ Interview with Emory Moore Jr.

The Style Grid

We found in our interviews and observations that there are a variety of styles that personal trainers employ to get effective results for their clients. We immediately saw that if we could convey the style of a trainer in some way to potential clients, it could greatly help individuals find the right trainer. We then went through rounds of user testing to come up with understandable yet descriptive visualizations that portray a trainer's training style.

Before we started interviewing trainers and clients, we first decided upon a list of words that would describe what kind of trainer somewhat was. We labeled trainers with words like "Encourager", "Drill Sergeant", and "Coach" to try to give the user hints as to the training style of the user.

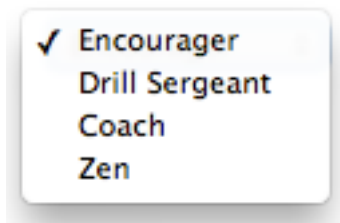


Figure 1-1: Style Dropdown

The main issue that came up in user testing is how many users said how they would like a personal trainer with a combination of these qualities. You can be an "Encourager" and a "Drill Sergeant" at the same time depending on how you like to be encouraged.¹⁶ It seemed that we needed to convey more information in order to get a better shot at describing the style of the trainer.

¹⁶ User Testing for Style Dropdown

Our next iteration of the style grid is a one-dimensional slider that would demonstrate a fixed range between the two extremes. The idea is that you can see the range that a personal trainer could be between two adjectives: a longer bar would mean that the trainer changes styles drastically for maximum effectiveness. A shorter bar would mean that that trainer is highly effective in a given part of the spectrum

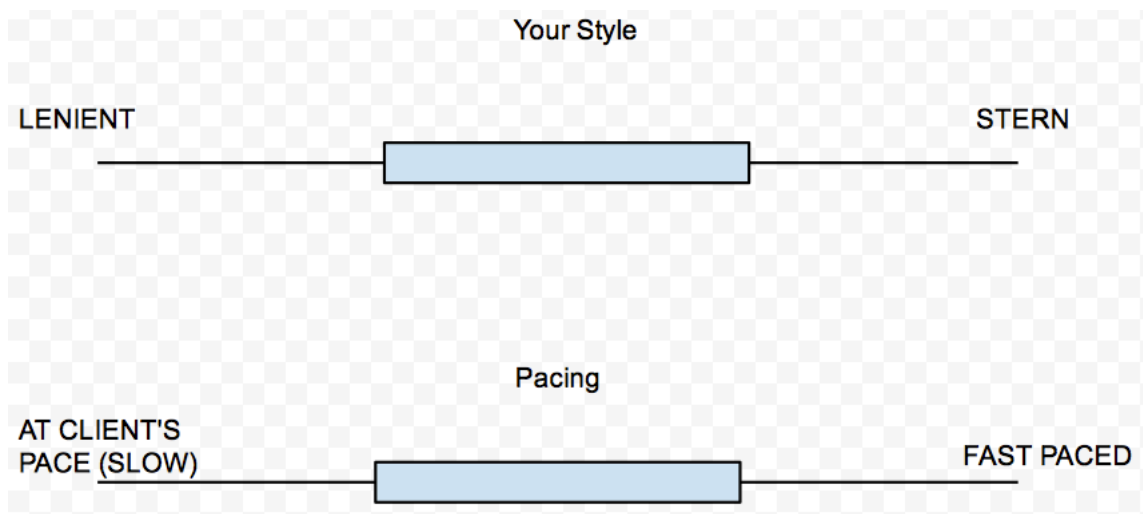


Figure 1-2: Style Slider

With this iteration trainers are able to demonstrate that their style lies within a specific range in between the two extremes. However, after user testing this digital artifact had a few issues. Firstly, users had a hard time reading the bars: what does long bars in the middle truly mean? Secondly a negative connotation can be inferred for trainers with smaller bars, even though these bars represent styles that could all be successful.¹⁷

With that information in mind, we iterated again to a 2 x 2 grid and we add a circle that would encompass what a trainer's style would be. In the below example, if

¹⁷ User Testing from Style Slider

someone was on the upper right, that trainer would be one that pushes pace and is stern.

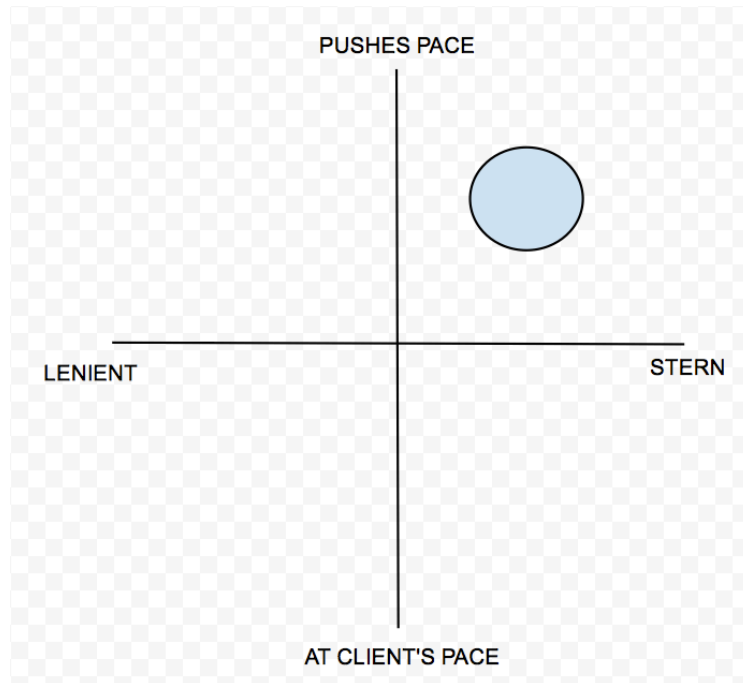


Figure 1-3: Style Grid #1

When we ran this digital artifact through user testing, we had mixed results. First the naming of the axes was very important: preconceived connotations of a word could make the overall understanding of a trainer style completely different from reality. Another issue that we found is that again if the circle was in any way near the center of the grid, people had a harder time of what that meant. The last issue we found is that trainers wanted to stretch the circle in different ways in order to better portray their range of training styles.¹⁸

¹⁸ User testing of Style Grid #1

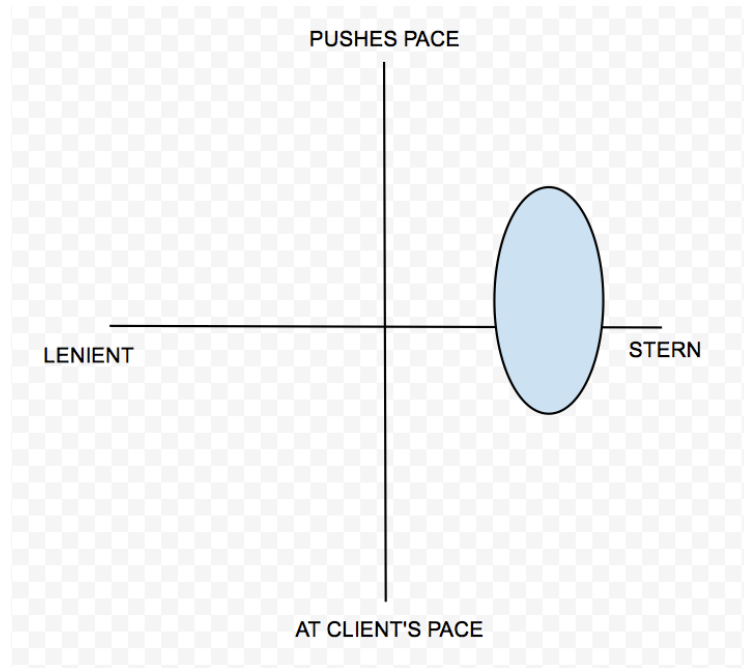


Figure 1-4: Self Reported Style Grid (#1) of Trainer

In the above example, our usability test provided a fixed size circle on a Google Docs drawing, and the trainer stretched the circle in order to give the full range of his expertise. This gave us a core insight: some trainers would want to portray a range of skills and modify the shape of the circle, while some would want to keep with the standard circle. However, if we gave free reign to what a trainer can size the circle, we can see many trainers expand the style grid to the whole grid, to try to be all things to all people in order to try to get the most potential clients. That wouldn't be useful for people trying to find the write trainer.

So in our last iteration we moved from a 2 x 2 graph to a quantized 3 x 3 grid and restrict trainers from filling out only one to three of the nine possible blocks. This way users are assured a trainer will not fill up the whole grid with their perceived range, and trainers can more easily fill out the style grid.

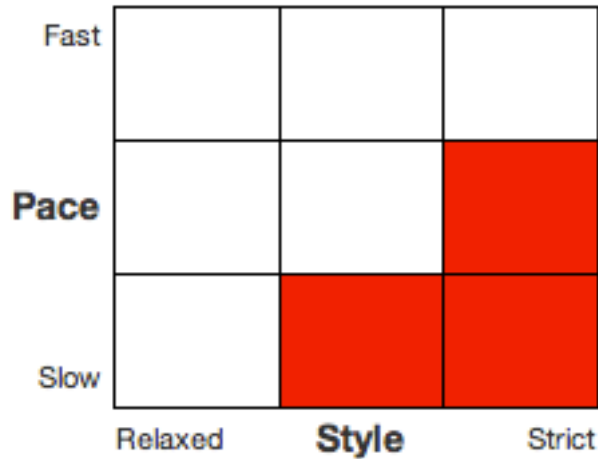


Figure 1-5: Style Grid #2

We gained our best reception with this version of the style grid because there are only three levels of each axes and we found in user testing that people mostly understand what they are looking at. However, we still need to continue evaluating the words that we use on each axis in order to reduce confusion.¹⁹

Ratings

Another digital artifact that we derived from our interviews is how to deal with reviews and ratings. Our first idea is to take the cue of Amazon and Yelp and try out the five star rating system. Potential clients would be able to go through ratings of trainers the highest rated trainers would have the benefit of favorable public opinion. However, in user testing and comments from our presentations, we found that a trainer could be highly rated by one person and poorly rated by another person solely because of preferences of style and personality. A drill sergeant and an encourager can both be

¹⁹ User testing of Style Grid #2

effective trainers, but if the wrong client is matched with either of them they could get very low ratings.²⁰

After a few iterations we settled with structured ratings, suggested by one of the clients that we interviewed Mary Hodder. She mentioned how important professionalism was and how poor marks in that department could turn her off from a trainer no matter how talented he or she is.²¹ Isha Dandavate echoed this sentiment as well. From this core insight we came up with three categorical ratings: Professionalism, Knowledgeability, and Effectiveness. Professionalism speaks to a personal trainer's punctuality and conduct. This category came from our key insight on the importance of professionalism in personal training relationships: many potential clients would rather train with a moderately skilled trainer that is on time than an expert that is not. Knowledgeability focuses on the knowledge that the personal trainer showcases and how he or she employs that knowledge. Several of our clients echoed the importance of form when executing exercises in order to get the maximum benefit and prevent injury. So we give that area it's own category. Lastly, Effectiveness focuses on whether that trainer could use his or her knowledge to help their clients reach their goals.



Figure 2: Structured Ratings

²⁰ Comments from iSchool Hackathon

²¹ Interview with Mary Hodder

Other considerations

Other considerations include the introduction of prominent pictures and video on our website. It was repeated throughout our interviews and observations that a trainer's appearance was very important to client's decision process so we make sure that that is a prominent part of the site. We also incorporate video as well to give clients a more real look of how the trainer interacts with clients. We deemphasized certifications since trainers are suspicious of them and potential clients largely don't really know about the different certifications. Lastly, trainer's availability are in the featured locations of our website and in our primary search so that potential clients can quickly find trainers that they could train with.

The image shows a personal trainer profile for Kay Ashaolu. At the top left is a photo of Kay, a man in a grey tank top, holding a clipboard. To his right, his name 'Kay Ashaolu' is displayed in a large, bold font, followed by 'Personal Trainer for over 30 years'. Below this are three categories: 'Professionalism', 'Knowledgeability', and 'Effectiveness', each with a row of five stars. To the right of the name is a 'Schedule' section with a grid for days of the week (Mo, Tu, We, Th, Fr, Sa, Su) and a blue 'Contact Me!' button. Below the photo and name are tabs for 'About', 'Packages', and 'Reviews'. The 'About' tab is active, showing a video player with the title 'X-Train Abs Part 2: Obliques' and a play button. To the right of the video is a text block titled 'More about Kay' with a paragraph of text. Below the video and text are three sections: 'Experience' with a sub-section '24 Hour fitness' and a paragraph of text; 'Certifications' with two items: 'ISSA Pending Verification' and 'NSCA-CSCS Pending Verification'; and 'Specialities' with two items: 'Weight Lifting' and 'Running'. To the right of the 'About' section is a 'Style Grid' section with a 3x3 grid. The grid has 'Pace' on the y-axis (Fast, Slow) and 'Style' on the x-axis (Relaxed, Strict). The cells for (Fast, Relaxed), (Fast, Style), and (Slow, Relaxed) are red. The 'Specialities' section is located below the 'Style Grid'.

Kay Ashaolu
Personal Trainer for over 30 years

Schedule ☑

Mo Tu We Th Fr Sa Su

Contact Me!

Professionalism Knowledgeability Effectiveness

★★★★★ ★★★★★ ★★★★★

About Packages Reviews

X-Train Abs Part 2: Obliques

More about Kay ☑

Whether your goals are to build bigger biceps, lose weight to get lean and tone, or improve back and joint health, I can work with you to get the body, strength and vitality you want. My experience in yoga, Pilates, core strength conditioning, strength and toning, balance and flexibility, boxing and kickboxing, and - that all important nutrition, gives me the tools to build you a complete program that supports your continuous improvement to meet your goals.

Experience ☑

24 Hour fitness
From Feb. 1, 2000 to May 1, 2012

I sought out to create a highly effective personal training experience for busy individuals who wanted to improve their physical health but lacked the time or knowledge. My commitment to my clients' health is ongoing as I challenge myself to be one of San Francisco's top personal trainers.

Certifications ☑

ISSA Pending Verification
NSCA-CSCS Pending Verification

Specialities ☑

- Weight Lifting
- Running

Style Grid ☑

Fast			
Slow			
	Relaxed	Style	Strict

Figure 3: Trainer Profile

Conclusion and Future Work

We found that classifying the style and demeanor of a personal trainer in order to match them with the right clients is a large order, because there are so many factors to consider: training style, pace, knowledge and punctuality to name a few. As we launch our website, it will be absolutely essential to set up A/B testing on our website so that we can continually test our assumptions with larger amounts of people. The P2PTrainer project will be a startup that will continue to seek the best way of portraying trainers in order to match the right person with the right trainer.