

# Great Suggestion!

MAKE YOUR SUGGESTION BOX MORE THAN JUST A DUSTY ACCESSORY.

By Kymberly Williams-Evans, MA

*“Got a super suggestion? Great—put it in the box!” “Oh, you have a complaint? May I direct you to our input box?”*

**A**re suggestion boxes worth the space they take up, or are they simply dust gatherers? Do they provide usable feedback or just deflect members from a possibly uncomfortable conversation?

As a fitness manager, handling a suggestion box is probably not on your top 10 list of things to do. Nevertheless, when properly used, suggestion boxes can provide hard-to-obtain insights from your members. By addressing a few issues, you can boost the results you get.

## Location, Location, Location

If you already have a suggestion box, how can you increase member usage? The key word from managers known for successful setups is “accessibility.” Amy Stone, group fitness director for RiverPlace Athletic Club in Portland, Oregon, reveals that her club’s physical layout directs all club visitors through a front-desk passageway, both coming and going. “We provide one suggestion box, at the front desk only, but it is so accessible and visible that we get consistent feedback through it.” Greg Lappin, general manager for the Rochester Athletic Club in Rochester, Minnesota, had a carpenter make three oak boxes that he positioned at the front desk, activity desk and club restaurant. “Having boxes at each major contact point makes them hard to miss. I value member input so much that the first thing I do when I walk into the club each day is check the boxes for cards.” Another way to increase written feedback is to keep input forms and pens or pencils handy.

## Talk Up the Written Word

While accessibility may passively increase written feedback, active encouragement makes a big difference, too. Simply setting a box on a countertop or hanging one on a wall is not enough. According to Stone, “Our entire staff is trained to encourage members to use the input box. Our group fitness instructors make class announcements. If our trainers, instructors or desk staff get a comment (especially a compliment), they listen and then guide the member to the box.”

Lappin takes a slightly different approach. “Use suggestion notes to validate or confirm a conversation, never to replace one. Our staff is trained to ‘own’ the solution to a problem. If a member has a verbal complaint, the employee has the responsibility and authority to act on it. What we do not want is for the staff person to direct the member away from a conversation to a written form.” The suggestion box just provides a backup for members who prefer not to deal face to face.

Dody Livingston, former fitness manager for Frog’s Club One in Solana Beach, California, noticed a pattern in her club’s suggestion box that indicated that getting fewer suggestions was not necessarily a bad thing. “I saw fewer notes when the other managers and I were investing more time in being personally accessible to members,” she says. “A lack of notes might mean simply that you are handling situations immediately and effectively.” Livingston points out that her office at Frog’s was out on the floor, and she had an open-door policy that encouraged interaction. Her goals were communicating and providing a vehicle for input. “With a relatively small club,” she says, “we could achieve

those goals before a comment or concern got to the note phase. In a way, the best suggestion box is one you don’t need because members’ requests have already been acknowledged.” While Livingston firmly believes in offering suggestion boxes, she thinks they are more important for clubs with large membership numbers.

## Upping the Advantages

When you want to increase written feedback, try setting up a reward system. For a given number of filled-out input forms with legible names and contact numbers, you could announce a drawing for a prize. Or the criteria could be based on time. For example, you could hold a drawing the first day of each month and include the names of all members

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who have made a suggestion the previous month. You are more likely to get input if members see that you value it.

Livingston believes that posting responses to written notes will generate commitment and more feedback. She recalls being impressed by a club that posted two or three member notes on the information board each week. Below each note was the club’s written response. She cites the example of a note complaining that the TV sets were hung so high that cyclists had to strain their necks to watch a show. Within a week, the club posted a note letting everyone know that staff members of varying heights had gotten on the bikes and verified that the TVs were in fact too high, so the sets were lowered.

Livingston explains the benefits of the written word: “Corporations are set to deal well with quantitative factors. While verbal feedback is tough to quantify, written notes allow us to track comments, trends and management’s responses. Corporations like what they can track.”

## Disadvantages Are Few

While managers see a number of advantages to suggestion boxes, they are hard-pressed to come up with a downside. The toughest scenario is receiving comments with no signature, name or contact number. “Without a name, we cannot provide education to the member writing, who may simply lack club information. Nor can we elicit more detail to better understand the problem,” Lappin laments. Stone points out another problem: “Sometimes we simply cannot read the writing.”

One possible disadvantage is that members may make a suggestion as a result of employee “lobbying.” For instance, an instructor who wants to be named the regular teacher for a class she or he has subbed for may lobby the participants to write notes asking for a teacher change. Fortunately, most managers are astute enough to recognize this backdoor persuasion.

Livingston sums up the goals of a suggestion box: “The right reason to have a box is to get member feedback that is honest. The *best* way to get feed-

back is for managers to be on the floor, interacting. The next best way is a suggestion box.”

*Kymerly Williams-Evans, MA, is willing to take any and all suggestions on how to improve even more the fitness program at University of California, Santa Barbara, where she is the group fitness director and academic advisor to the fitness instruction minor.*

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## Tips for Maximizing Written Feedback

### Have a Suggestion Box!

If your facility does not offer a mechanism for members to offer confidential, written feedback, you are losing an easy opportunity to improve.

**Make the Box Accessible and Easy to Use.** People are less likely to write a note when they have to ask where the box is or request a form or pen. Have pens, forms, a box and a place to write in easy view and access.

**Lock the Box.** Members are more apt to be honest and forthcoming if they sense that their input is confidential. One large California club places an unlocked, clear plastic box in the bathroom; everyone can see when notes are in the box. The combination of bathroom privacy and easy opening provides too great a temptation for some members to resist reading others' notes.

**Personalize the Form to Demonstrate That You Offer Personal Attention.** RiverPlace Athletic Club in Portland, Oregon, encourages members to write directly to the general manager with a printed lead-in that says, “Dear Sabrina” rather than, “To the Club Manager.” Also consider the difference between these closing salutations: “Thank you for taking time to write. Sincerely, The Management Team” versus “Thank you! Ted and Theresa.”

**Follow Up Every Time!** If a writer leaves any contact information, contact that person. Lack of response compounds the original problem that prompted the note with a second problem of not seeming to care. If the note asks for action and you can take that action, do so! Even if the note is anonymous, a member is watching to see what you plan to do. Greg Lappin of Rochester Athletic Club in Rochester, Minnesota, answers anonymous notes in his monthly club newsletter. Whether or not he or his department leaders are able to make the requested change, he addresses it in the “General Manager” column.

**Follow Up Quickly.** Some notes require immediate attention. For example, Amy Stone of RiverPlace cites the time a writer complained that the showers lacked hot water. Her club fixed the problem within 2 hours. Both Lappin and Dody Livingston, former manager of Frog's Club One in Solana Beach, California, set the goal of addressing all notes within 24 hours. In any case, be sure to respond within a week. If you take longer, the problems you create by seemingly ignoring members are bigger than the ones you would never have heard about if you lacked a box in the first place.

**Start With “Thank You” in Any Follow-Up Conversation.** Pay more than lip service to the concept of valuing member input. Even if you feel attacked, stay grateful for communication. As Lappin sees it, “A thank-you right away defuses anxiety that the commenter or I may feel and expresses the real gratitude I have for a member taking the time to allow me to improve my club.”