HOW TO REOPEN YOUR GYM
THE TWO-BRAIN BUSINESS STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE
How to Reopen Your Gym—Step by Step
By Chris Cooper

There’s no real end in sight to the COVID Crisis.

Some governments have reopened non-essential businesses such as gyms, but others have kept them closed. And some areas—such as Arizona—are being hit with a second wave of closures.

Here’s what’s clear:

1. When you are allowed to reopen, it will almost certainly be with restrictions. Each area will have its own set of rules, but at this point we have a good idea how to navigate them based on the operations of gyms that have already reopened successfully.

2. You should have a plan for an extended closure, as well as a second closure and reopening. No one knows how everything will play out, but you can be prepared for any of the scenarios.

My purpose is always to bring clarity, not to add to the noise. So I’m going to give you a clear plan to reopen your business—whether you’re able to do that in a week or six months. If you’re shut down again, you can circle back in the plan with more speed if you lay the groundwork properly the first time.

I’m also going to help you determine if you even want to reopen your bricks-and-mortar facility when you’re allowed to do so.

The overall goal, as always, is to help you achieve the profitability and stability that will allow you to live the life you want.

Coop
Constructing a Plan

When we build a plan, we do it on three levels:

- The vision level (we define the end goal clearly).
- The strategy level (broad strokes—“Here are the things we’ll do to get there”).
- The tactical level (“Here are the specific actions we’re going to take, one by one”).

When you think about all the things you could do—mostly tactics—you can feel paralyzed and overwhelmed. Starting with the vision will guide us to the correct tactics. Then you focus only on the things that will get you over the finish line.

Vision

When it reopens, your gym will have a mix of in-person clients and online training clients. This vision will help with attendance limitations and add a new revenue stream.

Strategy

We will achieve this vision in 4 steps.

1. Online only.
2. Flex training with small groups.
3. Flex training in public spaces.
4. Fully open facility.

I’ll break down the best tactics for each strategy in the next section.

But first, a lot of gurus are making noise right now, and a lot of ideas are being thrown around. Why should you listen to us?

I built the Two-Brain Business mentorship practice to be a two-way street. We collect data and best practices from gyms around the world, test and filter it, and then share the distillate with everyone else. The ideas are great, but the science is really in the filtering. Because what matters is proof. And everyone benefits from proof. It’s made gyms far more profitable, saved gyms from bankruptcy and saved everyone years of trial and error.

Because of this systematic approach, many gyms in Europe and Asia (even Africa) have been able to “see into the future.”
These gyms are actually way further ahead than we were at the same point in gym ownership; they’re benefitting from a flatter learning curve. They don’t have to repeat the mistakes we made in the U.S. and Canada.

But coronavirus has flipped that script. North American gym owners benefitted from the hard work of those gyms on the front lines. The Two-Brain gyms in Italy and China gave us daily feedback on what was working. When Berlin closed down in March, we had strategies to share—proven strategies. Because they had been battle tested. And when North America shut down, we were ready. As gyms responded worldwide, we collected data and information.

We’ll continue to share the best strategies as we find them, and we’ll also tell you the best path to recovery as we rebuild our businesses and adapt to the new conditions.

Our database of information and experience doesn’t exist anywhere else in the fitness world. It cost me $1.2 million so far to build. And it’s working.

With that data supporting us, here’s a step-by-step plan to reopen your bricks-and-mortar gym.

**Stage 1: Online**

Before the Covid Crisis forced the shutdown of most gyms in North America, we published our guide “How to Add Online Training in 24 Hours.” (Get it for free [here](#).)

Thousands of gym owners downloaded the ebook and made the critical pivot.

Most of the fitness industry did not. Some of the major brands, like 24 Hour Fitness, considered bankruptcy.

For most gym owners, the switch to online coaching has one simple goal: Keep people around until the gym reopens. (And retain them if gyms are forced to close a second time.)

With that goal in mind, the top tactics for online training are:

1. **Customize** your group programming for your members or upgrade them to personalized programming. Offer a virtual group gathering every day or two (it can be a group workout but doesn’t have to be).

2. Ask your top clients, “What do you need most from me right now?” Then tailor your service depending on their answers.
3. Start attracting new customers using Affinity Marketing, then turn to organic marketing online, and then learn how to use paid ads. Don’t just jump straight to the last one because it seems sexy. (You can download our Affinity Marketing guide for free [here](#).)

4. Stay in contact with members who cancel. Text them every week and ask, “How are you feeling? How can I help you right now?” Keep communication open.

Here are our recommendations for pricing, delivery and tools:

**Level 1**

Price this level to be slightly more expensive than your most popular group rate. (During covid-19: Offer it at the same rate they’re paying but make sure they know it’s a more expensive service.)

**Delivery:** Group programming customized to each client individually. Text twice per day, before and after the workout.

**Tools:** Text clients a video—or step up with a software platform like TrueCoach. But that’s optional.

**Level 2**

Price this service to be about 33 percent more than the base package.

**Delivery:** Group programming customized to each client individually, plus nutrition plans and tracking.

**Tools:** MyFitnessPal ([here’s an article on how to use MyFitnessPal as a coach: Two-Brain Coaching](#)). Text and email. No video other than that used to conduct nutrition meetings.

**Level 3**

Price this level of service to be about twice as costly as the base package.

**Delivery:** Personalized programming and a personalized nutrition package, with regular online video goal reviews and nutrition plan updates. Add a third element, like habits tracking or mindset programming. This is especially valuable during times of uncertainty or crisis.

**Tools:** MyFitnessPal, text, email, video for 1:1 calls.
Stage 2: Flex Training in Small Groups (or 1:1)

In their bids to reopen nonessential spaces such as gyms, most governments are restricting group class sizes.

For example, Northern Utah issued a number of guidelines for gyms:

“The (Bear River Health Department) order requires the facilities to screen all employees and customers for symptoms prior to entering the building, allow only one person per 100 square feet, eliminate all group activities and the use of locker rooms and showers, and disinfect equipment after each use.” (ABC News)

If your state allows one person per 100 square feet and you have 1,000 square feet of workout space, your group size might be capped at nine (plus the coach). Other states are banning “group activities” but allowing 1:1 training. And the number of classes you can run will also decrease. If you’re running online group classes from your gym, those will still count as a class.

On April 20, also in the U.S., Georgia announced some businesses would be able to reopen with conditions by April 24: “Each of these entities (including gyms) will be subject to specific restrictions, including adherence to Minimum Basic Operations, social distancing, and regular sanitation.”

Since then, other jurisdictions have followed suit, each with its own timeline and rules. And some governments have shut gyms down again. In other areas, gyms are still closed.

Overall, reopenings are great news for personal trainers but horrible news for big-box gyms. The great news for you is that you sell coaching, not access. So while you can’t get back to the 20-people-in-a-class model yet, you can slowly bring people back—you just can’t bring everyone back to the full class schedule yet.

When China attempted to reopen their gyms, they allowed four people to work out together (spaced 6 feet apart in all directions). But they also forced gyms to close every four hours for a two-hour mandatory “sanitization” process. That meant a maximum of eight classes in a 12-hour day, or 32 clients trained total. And this reopen lasted less than 72 hours before gyms were shut down again.

When gym owners in Georgia surveyed members before the potential reopening date, about 50 percent said they wouldn’t yet be ready to return to the gym if it opened. This split was consistent in three different membership surveys. See Stage 4 below for more details.

The safe bet is to assume your clients will still need to do at least some of their workouts at home for the next few months—so you must set up a system like the Flex model, a combination of in-person and online coaching.
For example, maybe your clients attend one personal training session per week and you assign three “homework” workouts. The homework can be your general group programming customized to their needs. And you check in on them every day when they’re not in the gym.

Or maybe your clients attend two group sessions per week and complete their nutrition homework and three other “home” workouts online.

The Flex model is a bridge between your new online business and your old bricks-and-mortar business, and the service should be priced according to the amount of personalization you provide. We teach the pricing strategy behind the Flex model in our mentorship program, but here are the basics:

1. If you’re providing in-person personal training, charge personal training rates.

2. Don’t give more service for less money. More personal attention carries more value. Group training is still your “discount” option.

3. Take the time to carefully determine your rates. The rate you set now will be hard to change later.

Here is an example of pricing for Flex services in one Two-Brain gym. Adjust these prices based on your group rates and personal training rates. Also note that these are weekly rates, not monthly:

**Bronze**

Price: $39 per week (includes individualized programming, email communication, etc.).

**Silver**

Price: $59 per week (includes everything in Bronze, plus nutrition accountability and daily text communication).

**Gold**

Price: $79 per week (includes everything in Bronze and Silver, plus stress-management/wellness coaching and a weekly one-on-one Goal Review Session).
Stage 3: Flex Training Plus Public Spaces

Public spaces, such as parks, are likely to be reopened before nonessential services are allowed to open. In some areas, gyms are allowed to offer outdoor workouts at their facilities.

Start offering group workouts outdoors as soon as possible. These workouts can replace online group workouts done over Zoom. They can be done with minimal equipment but will still require social distancing.

Here are a few tips:

- Plan programming that allows lots of space between people. Ask members to bring a mat and water bottle.

- Set up an A-frame sign with your gym name and website on it. Attach a bottle of hand sanitizer to the sign.

- If you bring equipment (like dumbbells), make a public show of cleaning it thoroughly before putting it back in your car.

- Implement a “virtual high-five” ritual. Social distancing rules are still in play, and your gym is still on stage. Not everyone who sees these public displays will welcome them. Make sure you’re not breaking the rules—no one can really afford a fine right now.

Training in parks or your parking lot won’t be enough to keep your audience engaged. You won’t be able to offer as many classes as you used to, and weather will further limit your opportunity. But it’s one step toward training people in person again, and after weeks of being locked indoors, an outdoor class might be a huge relief for your clients.

Plan to invite your members to a specific class once per week in addition to their online training. When weather interrupts, fall back on Zoom classes.

Stage 4: Fully Open Facility

When you get here, you’ll be excited, and I definitely get it. But you won’t go from 0 to 100 overnight. Here’s your plan, from the early stages to a time when things are at least a little closer to “normal.”
First plan to reopen with either personal training or limited-size classes. Some governments have given a headcount limit, some have banned "group gatherings," and some have given a capacity limit based on square footage.

The bottom line is that you won't be opening with 20 people in a class, and you probably won't be able to train every client every day.

Add at least 30 minutes between classes to minimize cross-contamination and give you time for cleaning and setup.

Close your bathrooms and showers.

You might also be required to take client and coach temperature before classes. Order a no-touch thermometer.

You will have to clean every piece of equipment after every use, and clients can't share equipment.

Order extra lacrosse balls and extra mobility bands.

One good idea from a gym owner: "I'm getting ... small containers, and everyone will have a TheraBand and lacrosse ball for their own use, with their name on their container. Because we will now have to pre-register for class, I will be able to set these out ahead of time for everyone."

Stock up on bleach cleaner, hand sanitizer and toilet paper.

Send out a detailed email about your cleaning protocol and what you expect from members upon returning. For a sample email from Ric Thompson at CrossFit PTC: Click here.

Take away the communal chalk bucket.

Mark out spaces for clients to use in advance. Place equipment in each space before they arrive to avoid crowding at racks.

Limit movements where it's hard to distance people.

If you have a longer rig, mark out spaces on your pull-up bars to adhere to government requirements. If you don't, cut out hanging movements.

Make a huge show of cleaning before, during and after classes.

Reach out to all members to see what they're comfortable with and how they plan to continue training to best suit their needs.
As noted above, some of the leading gym owners in Atlanta, Georgia, surveyed their members on April 20 when considering reopening on April 24. Here are some of the results:

Do you feel comfortable returning to the physical gym for group classes or private training with a 10-12 person cap in the facility as soon as Friday April 24th?

47 responses

Here are three other interesting results from an Atlanta owner:
Gym owners commented on their survey results:

"26 responses in and we are 50/50 for Friday."

"I've received about 150 responses with the same results (51% not ready to come back and happy with remote and Zoom). I'm not opening next week."

"We are 50/50 as well."

One owner offered a key piece of advice after almost making an error: "Please advise folks to stop and ask their coaches what they are comfortable with." Not every coach will want to return to work, so you must survey your staff to find out who is willing to do what when you reopen.

With this data in mind, plan a limited class or training schedule around the clients who respond that they want to come in to train. Offer the rest of them the opportunity to keep training online (see below).

As these simple surveys clearly show, not everyone wants to come back to the gym yet.

Finally, avoid the temptation to make a political statement with your gym. That can't possibly help you and will almost certainly hurt you.

**Do You Need a New Waiver?**

Some gym owners brought up an important question:

"Do I need a new waiver to protect me from clients who might get infected?"

I called Vaughn Vernon at AGuard. He provided a best practices platform using Centers for Disease Control and Occupational Safety and Health Administration guidelines.
Vaughn said, "The feedback I have gotten from all my carriers is not to do any changes on the waiver. Should things change, we'll notify our clients right away."

Vaughn also said that a pandemic is a standard exclusion from insurance policies because it would be very hard to pinpoint a fitness facility as being the lynchpin to covid or any pandemic.

"The CDC is putting out a clause where if you document cleaning to their standard, you should be buffered, but this is an uninsurable risk with or without a waiver," he said.

Basically, don't change your waiver. But document your cleaning. If you don't want a job as a full-time cleaner, don't reopen. And as eager as you are, talk to every member in person.

Retention and Potential New Revenue Streams

Reopening your facility might be a huge relief to you. But many owners are already finding that some of their clients actually prefer online training. And other clients will be reluctant to rejoin large groups again.

Over 24 years as a coach, I’ve learned to never assume that I know what my clients want. So I just ask them.

Because online training is a higher-value service than group training in person, gym owners shouldn’t miss these opportunities by simply saying “back to class!” when their doors reopen. It’s worth the time to ask every single member, “What do you want now?”

That means your reopening is the perfect time to do a Goal Review Session with every single member and update their prescriptions to include online training, personal training, group training, nutrition coaching, habits coaching—or whatever they need from you most.

I said that one of the keys to successful online training is to ask your top clients “what do you need most from me right now?” and then tailor your service depending on their answers.

But that’s always been the best strategy for gym owners to follow anyway.

The key to retention isn’t better programming or more space. The key is maintaining a 1:1 relationship with every client in your gym, even if they exercise in a group.

That means frequent Goal Review Sessions—and it also means changing your service to reflect what your clients need.

So as you ramp up your physical location, send each client a personalized message:
“Hey, Heather, I’m really excited to get back to our barbells again. But some clients have told me they love doing some of their workouts at home, and a few are even choosing to stay online! What do you think would work best for you over the next few months?”

After you hear the answer, you respond with “Great! Here’s how we can do that.” Provide a price. If you were careful about setting your rates for online coaching, this should be a snap. If a higher rate comes as a surprise to your clients, then you’ve anchored their expectations incorrectly. Get on a call with a mentor to talk about how to fix the mistake.

As always, remember this: Group training is your discount option.

After they choose their program, you respond with this: “Fantastic. Can’t wait to see you. Can we plan to review your progress and preferences again in three months?” Then set a date for the next Goal Review. People will want and need different levels of service at different times.

Then set up the new training plan and run with it.

**Welcome Home!**

Build the feelings of belonging for a week before you start marketing to prospective members. First, when government instructions allow it, set up a reunion event that’s private for your clients only. They’ll be excited to see everyone and get back to training.

Then remember this: People don’t usually go out of their way to recruit their friends. The best time to start an initiative to capture new clients is when your current clients are feeling grateful. So a week after opening, plan a “bring your friend to fitness” day.

These “free community workouts” and “free trials” haven’t been effective since 2015 because they only work for self-driven early adopters. But the covid-19 crisis has forced a lot more of those folks out of hiding and pushed some late adopters to take action. More people in the public will want to pursue health and fitness. Many will have adopted a workout routine or diet for the first time, and your physical gym can be the “next step” after they started their fitness journeys online.

For now, there’s new low-hanging fruit on the vine—and fewer pickers in the vineyard, too.

Many big chain gyms will have to reopen slowly. And Facebook ad costs are currently at 2015 levels. Those opportunities won’t last long. So after you’ve taken a bit of time to reinforce your connection with your clients—and shown them that they’re your top priority—get back to Affinity Marketing, organic marketing and paid marketing. Push hard.

Special note: Don’t expect the progression from Stage 1 to Stage 4 to be a straight line. There will almost certainly be backtracking. It’s happening, so be prepared for it.
What If You Don’t Want to Reopen?

There’s one more consideration:

“What if I don’t want to reopen at all?”

In the next period, some gyms are going to reopen. Some aren’t. But we’ll all have to choose. And it won’t come down to the governments or the lawyers or the other gyms in town. As always, it will all come down to you.

For some, health risks will outweigh the fiscal reality. For others it will be different. Some have the ability to choose; some don’t.

We are all trying to do the best thing here. We are all trying to serve.

No one is evil. No one is hurting anyone.

First, revisit your hierarchy of priorities. As a review, they are:

- Your family.
- Your clients.
- Your staff.
- Your audience.

It's OK to not open.

Your gym family trusts you. If you say “I want to make absolutely sure you’re safe, so we’re going to wait,” that’s fine.

The key is to communicate your care.

This is the worst time to be silent. Tell your staff and your members:

1. Why you want to wait (you care about them and don't want to take risks).
2. Your plan to reopen with options.
3. That you love them and appreciate their patience.

Your business exists to serve you. Sometimes the sacrifices you make are determined by other people. This is one you can control.

Open on your terms.
No Matter What: Share Your Plan

The true measure of leadership in your gym won’t be how you manage the closure of your facility but the reopening. You’ll have to balance the cares and concerns of your clients against the fiscal realities. It’s the same thing politicians are wrestling with, but you’ll do it on a micro scale, and the pressure will be immediate.

The best strategy is to outline your plan far in advance to your staff and clients.

Tell your people your plan.

Warn them that the process will take time—but that you’ll keep coaching them no matter what.

Show them the worst-case scenario and celebrate the small steps forward. Really celebrate.

Share the blame but accept responsibility.

You can read or listen to my simple model for leadership in a crisis (the CALM model) here:

“How to Lead in a Crisis” (blog)

Two-Brain Radio (podcast)

Average Vs. Extraordinary

Not every gym in your community will follow the plans laid out above. As hard as it is to accept, not every gym is going to make it.

Some secretly stayed open during the shutdown. Some taped paper over their windows and ran classes out of desperation. They probably didn’t have a plan to do otherwise and made a short-term decision to buck convention or law. Or maybe the owner didn’t personally agree with the shutdown rules and used the businesses to make a political statement.

Those aren’t smart moves. And you serve smart people.

Smart people will not react well to gyms that try to cheat. Smart people react well to cautious, optimistic leaders.
As you try to be that leader, you might feel as if you have to “keep up with the Joneses.” You might feel as if you have to read every comment in every Facebook group or risk missing some vital new idea. You might feel as if you have to do everything instead of working really hard on the right things. It’s just how we’re wired.

Average gym owners aren’t going to have this plan. They’re going to get overwhelmed, and it’s a bad time to be average.

Over the last few years, I’ve watched the gym industry polarize. The best gyms are growing faster than ever, and everyone else is falling further behind.

Three years ago, the “average” gym had about 120 members, 5,000 square feet of space, ran only classes and barely broke even. But that middle is disappearing. And this crisis puts pressure on the whole system, causing “the middle” to disappear even faster.

What’s causing the separation? Data and best practices. While the top gyms constantly measure, test and refine, the worst gyms just try to do everything. That means the best gyms are getting ready to sprint. The worst are getting ready to close.

I think everyone understands this. But yet it’s hard to avoid being average. It’s hard to stand out. It’s hard to differentiate yourself and say, “I’m not like you.” When other gym owners criticize or attack you—or even copy you—it’s hard not to engage, right? Because we think we’re wandering away from the safety of the group.

The group says, “Just do video classes. You’ll be fine.” The best gyms don’t accept that because they hear “average.”

The group says, “You can’t coach someone without a barbell.” The best gyms know that isn’t true because they hear “average.”

**A Fresh Start With Swifter Ascension**

The bottom line: No one is coming to save you. It’s really up to you. You’re back in Founder Phase again—the first stage of entrepreneurship.

What’s that mean? It means you’re the primary service provider. It means you have to make daily contact with each of your clients. It means you have to direct all your energy into relationships. It means you have to ask your clients “how can I help you today?” and expect the answer to change each week.

It also means you’re free.

It means you can start over.
It means you can make up your business from scratch.

It means you don’t have to adhere to dogma or preconceived notions of what’s best anymore.

It means you can rebuild. And this time you can do it on a foundation of data instead of guesses.

You know I’m going to say, “Get a mentor.” All your heroes have mentors.

But if you can’t get a mentor, ask for proof before you act.

Click here for a huge collection of free gym-building tools just like this one.