

Introduction: Your Dojo as a Business

by Corey Guilbault and Chett Rubenstein

July 2004

Training vs Business

Toyoda Shihan left us all a legacy focused on the training and development of qualified Aikido instructors. He also trained us in how to set up and run a profitable dojo, for without proper management of the business side of Aikido we would not have a place to train and to spread the way of Aikido to others. The AAA Instructors Manual contains his guidance including examples of administrative forms and advice on dojo location, promoting the program, etc.

However, in conversations with others about dojo business we have noticed a general sense of unease and we suggest their maybe a few reasons for this. One is that many people are not clear on the distinction between an entrepreneur and a technician. As strong Aikidoka (technicians) we start dojo with enthusiasm only to quickly find out we need the skills of an entrepreneur who focuses on the business as a system for delivering products and services to customers (please refer to *The E-Myth Revisited* by Michael Gerber for excellent coverage of this topic). We have not been formally trained in these skills so we get nervous.

A second reason we believe people are anxious about dojo business is that they fear becoming too “commercial.” Toyoda Shihan left us a beautiful example of what a traditional dojo looks and feels like, infused with the Japanese culture of his homeland. In that setting he created stringent testing requirements so we knew when we passed a kyu or dan test we had really accomplished something. As dojo-cho we look around at all the competing martial arts studios and see the local Ninjas-R-Us with tons of students who get rank belts handed out basically for showing up. Do we need to lower our standards or lose the culture and tradition we learned just to satisfy the hyper, MTV-infused, we-want-it-now mentality of the American consumer, just so we can pay the dojo rent and electric bills? No wonder this topic causes stress!

Overview of the Series

It is our hope that this series of articles will provide some additional basic training in dojo business so you can begin to feel at ease with this subject. The series is organized into six articles including this one. Future topics include Branding: How to Distinguish Yourself; Business Structure: Getting Organized; Business Administration and Program Creation; Marketing and Using the Web; and Ongoing Participation: Creating Community. They cover the full life cycle of conception, creation, development and sustenance.

We hope that these articles will provide not only an outline for people to guide them through the creation of successful dojo, but also an ongoing dialog among our members to see how we can better serve our students, their families and the communities in which they live.

Start Now!

So, when do we start? We suggest you do not wait for the next issue of Aikido World so you can read the next article. Start now! Even if you already have an established dojo, go back to the basics just as we continually return to kihon waza in our Aikido training. Start to take a look at what is the true mission of your dojo and how you want to distinguish yourself in your community. Do not just do this in your head - it needs to be written down so it can be reviewed and shared with others for feedback and input.

Both of us have entrepreneurial start-up experience and now have our own businesses in addition to operating our respective dojo. We also have helped many other companies to improve their businesses in many areas. If you would like to discuss this topic further before the next issue, please contact us at corey@aikidonorwalk.com or chettr@phoenixaikido.org. We are always looking to share stories of best practices so we can all improve our skills in the art of dojo business.

In the next issue of Aikido World we will look into this topic of branding in more depth. Until then, peace.

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Dojo Business is a series of articles conceived of and written by Corey Guilbault and Chett Rubenstein. Guilbault Sensei is dojo-cho of Aikido of Norwalk (<http://www.aikidonorwalk.com>) and Rubenstein Sensei is dojo-cho of Phoenix Aikido (<http://www.phoenixaikido.org>). With over 40 years of combined business experience, they have expertise in marketing, branding, design, technology, accounting and finance.