



Leading by Example

A 60-something trainer proves that age isn't a factor when it comes to fulfilling your dreams BY RACHEL DEBLING

When one of **Edna Levitt's** elderly clients sheepishly handed her a neatly folded note, Levitt wasn't sure what to expect. The contents of the letter, however, left the 69-year-old trainer howling with laughter.

"It was a prescription from her doctor," she recalls. "It said only one thing: 'Get a personal trainer, use as directed, minimum one year.'"

While many sexagenarians spend their golden years quilting, baking or tanning themselves to a crisp in sunny Florida, Levitt has taken the road less travelled. As the founder of Toronto-based 50+ fitness, Levitt

has all the energy and tenacity of a trainer forty years her junior. Catering to the 50-and-older crowd, as her business name suggests, Levitt nurtures her senior clients physically, socially and mentally, enabling them to live fuller, longer lives.

A few years after moving to Canada from Scotland, her son suggested that she give exercise a go. So at age 50, Levitt heeded his advice. She was thrilled when working out brought her from being a self-proclaimed "slob" to someone whose toned arms today receive accolades from complete strangers.

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PHOTOS: JEN ARRON



Edna Levitt

Years in the industry: four

Qualifications: Certified Personal Trainers Network (CPTN) personal trainer

Company: 50+ fitness

Toronto, Ont.

www.50plus-fitness.ca

Recommended resources: Active Living Coalition for Older Adults (www.alcoa.ca);

International Council on Active Aging (www.icaa.cc)

become a certified personal trainer. Levitt took up the challenge, achieved her certification and started her business soon afterward.

An atypical history and resume

Levitt admits that many other trainers depend mostly on impressive educational credentials and youthful vitality to succeed. But she believes she has an ace up her sleeve that few Gen Y fitness pros likely have: personal experience.

"I'm actually quite evangelical about fitness," she says. "I've seen what it's done for me, and I think that anyone over 55 who doesn't exercise is asking for trouble. I don't have to bullshit about its benefits."

Levitt considers herself a cheerleader above all and advocates using music and positive reinforcement to pump up older clients. Most of the exercises she performs mimic everyday motions and stimulate the atrophied muscles that seniors use on a daily basis. Training sessions usually occur in clients' homes; many are overweight exercise novices who are too embarrassed to join a gym. She also leads bi-weekly seniors' fitness classes at a local community centre.

Levitt teams up with two industry experts when leading workshops: Susan Sommers, a marketing guru and gym buddy, and Dr. Jen Castle, a nutrition specialist and Levitt's tutor during her personal trainer certification process. Together, their workshops cover a gamut of issues associated with seniors' health, including motivation, eating well and strength training. It is through these presentations that Levitt has secured new clients and business opportunities.

Levitt prides herself on the educational materials she provides to her clients. She has created a handout on the benefits of exercise, and she is planning on publishing an edition that focuses on easy and effective exercises to perform in front of the television. "It's a good place to start," she says, noting that two hours of TV offers 30 minutes of commercial time that can be filled with small bouts of exercise.

Spreading the word

When it comes to marketing, Levitt steers clear of print advertising primarily because of the cost. Instead, she focuses on giving back to the community. Philanthropy is a pastime she enjoys, and it has created numerous networking opportunities. From leading crowds in warm-ups at charity fundraisers to speaking at older adult events, Levitt sees this face time as an extremely valuable marketing tool.

Levitt believes that exercise must be a personal choice. She recalls some adult children, with good intentions, purchasing training packages for their aging parents hoping it would improve the parents' quality of life. But because the choice was the children's and not

the parents', she found that the mom and dad dropped their new healthy lifestyles as soon as the sessions wrap up. Now, Levitt says, she will only accept these types of clients if she speaks with them beforehand.

Her vibrant website was created with a local web designer. Borrowing the style and colour scheme from her newly minted business cards, Levitt and her designer worked hard to showcase the fun and functional fitness that her business represents. Levitt insisted being hands-on in all aspects of the design, penning the copy and selecting the photographs she felt best reflected herself and her company. By keeping the theme of her promotional materials homogenous, Levitt was able to create a brand that is easily recognizable and relatable.

Listen Up

The most important piece of advice that Levitt offers to other personal trainers is to listen to your clients. With a client base of mostly 60- to 80-year-olds, she encounters a fair share of aches and pains each day. Treating complaints with respect and due diligence is important when dealing with seniors.

"You need to be very empathetic with older clients," she advises. "Tell them to listen to their bodies – and you, the trainer, need to listen to what they say." Too many times clients have shared horror stories about previous trainers who pushed them too far resulting in injuries.

"All of my clients have arthritis in some part of their bodies," Levitt says. She recalls a client who told her she was waiting for an MRI for her hip. At that point Levitt knew to step back and let the medical professionals take over. "I told her to do what the doctors told her, and when they give her a clean bill of health we'd start up again."

Levitt is happiest helping the people who are not able to help themselves. Some of her older clients need a push to realize that strength training isn't so scary and that it can be an important component of their health and overall happiness.

"I'm not in the business of training people to do a marathon," she says. "My work is very focused on the benefits of strength training. I have decided that at this stage in my life this is the right place for me to be." FBC