

## What We Have Done To Ourselves

In a recent issue of a martial arts business magazine, it is reported that 70% of martial arts students are under the age of 14. Then, in a separate article, a martial arts business guru explains how to do adult classes “the right way”. He writes about keeping students for the long term and then reveals that that term is one to two years.

Does anyone remember when studying the budo was considered a way of life?

The author writes that MMA is the current fad in martial art arts but that prospective students do not expect to be octagon fighters. In fact, most don’t know Brazilian Jiu-jitsu from kickboxing but they relate martial arts to the *Ultimate Fighting Challenge* on TV, so MMA is capturing a lot of the adult market.

Are we reverting to the days when the common citizen did not know the difference between judo and karate? Has a decade of chop-socky films and five decades of martial arts in movies, on TV, and in everyday parlance not taught people anything?

Further, the article in question goes on to claim that if the MMA school owner provides high value, there are segments of the population that will pay \$200 to \$1200 a month for training, about 2 to 6 times the average monthly rate at this writing.

So much for the ideal of spreading the positive values of martial arts to the common person! The very business model that emphasized children’s classes as a way to spread the martial arts word, now emphasizes high-cost MMA lessons to adults, not to spread the word, but to stuff the pockets. I don’t have a problem with people earning money teaching the martial arts. In fact, I think martial arts teachers should consider themselves professionals much like coaches and/or professors, but I do have an objection to cutting off your best kicking leg in order to deliver a financial one-two punch, and appealing only to the wealthy for short-term gains seems to be just that. A school might correctly have a range of price options—no problem there—but just as school owners converted to kids classes to make a buck, I am concerned that they will convert to short-term, high-cost classes for the same reason.

The article finishes by stating that if a school abjures running its classes like a fitness center in favor of offering the student superior quality and service, then one can retain students for “a year, two years or to Black Belt and beyond.” I applaud the “return” to superior quality and service “to Black Belt and beyond”, but that suggests that we lost superior quality and service in following the fitness center business model that business gurus imitated a few decades ago. Sure, the MMA business owner can offer black belt contracts with “superior service” and “quality” instruction, but they are still the old-fashioned black belt contracts that substitute for commitment. Contracts or not, what happened to membership continuity based on loyalty and

dedication? In reducing martial arts to a business, we have created de facto sales situation between student and teacher that implies the consumer's loyalty is subject only to his/her immediate satisfaction or legal obligation. Has anyone ever left your school without a leave-of-absence, a formal resignation, or even a word of goodbye because they consider your relationship to be primarily a business relationship and not primarily a student-teacher relationship? When people feel that their payment gives them a status of "the customer is always right", little education will take place. The student always should have some influence on the school—I don't advocate schools as totalitarian states—but in training for martial arts mastery and, one hopes, for life mastery, a student-designed comfort zone masquerading as a school's "superior service" means that money trumps both knowledge and skill, and challenges the idea of budo as a way of life.