



Reflections from the field

Coach Referral Services: Do They Work?

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Abstract

The latest trend in coaching is to help coaches and clients find each other. The degree to which these services deliver a true match creates questions about their real purpose. The value for either coaches or clients is non-existent or minimal for most of these services. Only two of these services actually interview clients to determine their coachability and screen coaches to determine their competence; the remainder are merely warehouses or computerized databases.

Key Words: coach referral, coaching profession, client matching

Introduction

The coaching profession has grown dramatically around the world in the last few years, and a recent survey estimated that coaching generates \$1.5 billion in revenue worldwide (International Coach Federation, 2007).

Various sources estimate the number of coaches around the world to be approaching 30,000 (Carr, 2005a). The interest in coaching has increased primarily because the general public and business executives and managers have greatly expanded their search for ways to achieve a variety of personal, professional, spiritual and business goals. This high demand for coaches has been accompanied by a parallel growth in [coach training organisations](#). In 1999, for example, there were less than a dozen established schools, but as of July, 2008 there are now 291 training organisations competing for participants.

While this growth is helping to increase the supply of coaches, it has also led to a wide variety of coach qualifications, standards, training requirements, experience, certification and degrees. In addition there is no consensus as to industry standards nor is there any coach licensing, certification, or registration requirement of a legal nature in any jurisdiction in North America. In 2006 there were more than 60 different coaching credentials (many with the same name, but issued by unrelated organisations) awarded by coaching schools and organisations (Carr, 2005b), and eleven competing associations claiming to be the “standard-setter” for coaching.

While such rapid growth can be heralded as contributing to better choices and options, it has also become more difficult for members of the general public, business managers and executives, and

even coaches themselves to sort out the criteria to use to select the right coach. For example, a recent Internet search yielded almost a half-million individual coach websites offering an extensive array of services, descriptions, and qualifications. However, just as the number of coaches and coach training organisations has grown, so also has a parallel industry: coach referral services.

Several factors have led to the development of coach referral systems. First, because the coaching industry is entirely self-regulated, a number of individuals have established coach referral services as a way to educate the public, pinpoint appropriate coach qualifications, and assist potential clients to find the best coach. Second, since many coaches and clients connect via telephone or email only and never engage in face-to-face sessions, coaches anywhere have the potential for working with clients anywhere. Neither the coach nor the client is limited to a specific geographic location, thus widely increasing the pool of coaches from which to choose.

A more controversial reason for the increase in the number of coach referral systems is that many coaches believe they can coach anyone about anything (Porché & Niederer, 2001). It is not unusual for a wide range of specialties to appear in a coach resume. A recent study, for example, (and more fully detailed later in this article) revealed that many of the individual coaches listed in a professional association's coach referral service included more than 50 areas of specialty as part of their coaching profile.

While there may be some truth to a multiple niche viewpoint, it may reduce the likelihood that an individual searching for a coach will learn that a different type of practitioner (such as a consultant, psychologist or counsellor) might be a more appropriate choice.

How Coach Referral Services Work

The philosophy behind coach referral is simple: the better the match between the client and the coach, the more likely the coaching will be successful. Coach referral systems typically match client preferences and goals with coach qualifications and experience. But how this matching is accomplished and how the pool of potential coaches to be matched is determined varies widely.

Coach referral systems vary in the amount of client data they require before yielding the list of potential coaches. For example, some coach referral services require potential clients to enter a combination of personal data and coach requirements into an online form. Then with the click of a button a list of coach referrals is generated with descriptions of their qualifications and other details. In some cases users can speed up the process by selecting from a pre-determined set of coach characteristics, qualifications and specialties.

Other coach referral services only ask that the user enter keywords or phrases and, like a search engine, a list of coaches is generated. Typically no information is provided as to why certain coaches were matched with the client data requests. A few coach referral systems merely provide a static list of coaches and their qualifications and encourage users to scroll through the list and note down appropriate potential matches.

These computerised methods of matching are quick and easy, and a potential client can browse coach lists indefinitely at no cost and in many cases anonymously. However, it can also yield too many options and is subject to coaches padding their system information with many more "keywords," specialties, and buzz words in order to appear in a greater number of client searches. Computerized

matching also requires the potential client, who more than likely has little experience with coaching, to know and understand not only what he or she wants in a coach, but also which factors are most important in selecting a coach. Some sites assist with this dilemma by providing educational information about coach selection and readiness for coaching. However, in most cases this information is only about coaching and does not educate the potential client as to other options besides coaching.

An alternative to the computerised system exists that involves the potential client in a live, toll-free, no-cost, no-obligation telephone conversation with a coach referral consultant. The consultant engages in a personalized conversation with the client about possible goals, preferences, and other qualities. If, as a result of this discussion, the consultant and client conclude that coaching is appropriate, the service provides the client with a list and details of specific coaches who meet the client's preferences. The idea underlying this type of service is that a good match requires more than can be achieved through simple computer data connected to a warehouse of coaches. However, these services are rare, and as of 2008 only two such services exist (see the chart at <http://www.peer.ca/coachreferrals.html>)

Coach referral services vary in the extent of coach qualifications necessary to list each coach and the screening of the coaches in their database. Some sites have specific requirements and these requirements are clearly identified on the service website. A few sites mention that listed coaches must adhere to a code of ethics or professional conduct, but typically do not provide or describe any mechanism to monitor or enforce such a requirement.

Other sites have minimal requirements and provide no screening. In some cases membership in a particular organisation or current or graduate status from a particular coaching school is required. However, these two "requirements" can be somewhat misleading because screening for admission to the school or minimum standards for membership are neither described nor practiced. Only one coach referral service details the facts about the number of coaches who apply to list their service and the number the referral service actually accepts. (For a discussion regarding the increasingly contentious issue of certification, see Carr, 2004 and the poll on certification <http://www.peer.ca/CertVote.html>).

Virtually all the coach referral systems do not charge clients for their matching service, and most do charge coaches a fee for being listed. Some services request that clients pay a fee to them for the coaching and they, in turn, will provide the fee to the coach. Others do not enter into any fee arrangement and merely act as a go-between to connect the client and coach and no fees are involved for client-coach matching or coach listings. At least one service provides a money back guarantee.

While not directly part of the coach selection process, sites vary as to the degree of additional services they provide. From money back guarantees and follow-up monitoring to a variety of articles about selecting a coach, to newsletters or other support documents, to simply a list-only format, the coach referral services provide a wide range of value added services. In addition, the services vary as to how much information they provide about who owns, runs or maintains the service.

To increase credibility, contact information for an accountable service should go beyond an email address and include the mailing address, telephone number and business name of the service ownership. In this way, potential clients and coaches have a better opportunity to determine the legitimacy and accountability of the service as well as have more transparency in resolving possible conflicts or dissatisfactions.

Does Size Matter?

With the growth of coaching there has been until now a fairly cooperative and friendly relationship between various coaching associations and organisations. Cracks in this veneer are beginning to show as Coach Referral Services (and they are not the only ones) begin to crow about the number of coaches included in their warehouse. A larger pool of coaches in a service can mean a higher likelihood of finding someone with the specific experience and qualifications sought by a potential client. But as Grey Owl wryly pointed out, "No matter how much mayonnaise you put in chicken litter, it will not turn into chicken salad." Services that provide a large number of coach referral names often place the potential client in the position of the optimistic little boy who on unwrapping his unusual present concluded "With all this manure, there must be a pony in here somewhere."

Coach Referral Services from the Coaches' Perspective

In preparation for this article a survey was conducted of the computerized coach referral service (CRS) available through the [International Coach Federation](#) (ICF) to determine the value it had for listed coaches.

The ICF was selected because it has the largest membership in the coaching industry (12,000 members), is typical of the CRS models that provide no personal matching, and recent changes to membership requirements have resulted in its CRS now being available free to members (although members listed in the CRS must hold ICF certification), thus possibly increasing the number of listed coaches.

Two hundred coaches listed in the ICF CRS were selected for this survey, and contacted June, 2007. Coaches were selected by entering a number of general characteristics into the search form on the ICF website, and when the number reached 200, no further selections were made. While the total number of coaches listed in this service is unknown, the ICF website states that their CRS listings include "hundreds of coaches from around the world." Therefore, it is not possible to indicate what percentage the current sample is of the total listed in the ICF CRS, but it is likely that is around 60-80 percent.

The purpose of the survey at that time was to answer three questions: (1) Would it be of value for Peer Resources to recommend to our own members and those persons who currently list their coaching services in the Peer Resources coach referral service (a no-cost and keyword matching system) that they join the ICF and use their no-cost and computerized CRS? (2) Is the emphasis the ICF places on their CRS as a benefit of membership justified? And (3) What value, if any does accrue to those members listed?

Coach Referral Service Survey Results

In a little more than 30 days, sixty percent of the 200 coaches contacted responded to the following query posed via individual email to each of the 200 coaches:

I am considering listing my coaching in the ICF Coach Referral Service. I'd like to know more about the value it has had for others, and I wondered if you'd help me by providing some feedback about your experience of being listed. I'm not looking for anything

confidential, and I would appreciate your general impression as to whether being listed has been valuable for you. In other words, what benefit(s) have you experienced as a result?

I identified your name by conducting a search of the CRS using characteristics that most closely matched my own.

Thanks for your assistance.

The response rate was gratifying, particularly given what the responding coaches had to say about the ICF CRS. The vast majority saw no value in the service; many had been listed from the inception of the service (and had paid a yearly fee in addition to the membership fee to the ICF to maintain their listing); and none mentioned whether they had ever been contacted by the ICF to assess the value or obtain feedback from listed coaches about the service.

While most were disillusioned with the lack of clients as a result of the ICF CRS, many also indicated that since the service was now included as part of membership, it seemed reasonable to continue the listing. A few coaches, however, found the service quite valuable and indicated that the service had provided appropriate clients; others indicated that the only contact they had was from other coaches who were interested in discussing coach practice issues or by journalists interested in writing about coaching.

Other respondents indicated that although they had yet to gain a client from the ICF CRS, they liked being listed because it provided them with additional credibility for their coaching services.

In summary, participants in this survey typically said that generating revenue directly as a result of being listed was minimal, and a few coaches saw other advantages such as the “chicken soup” perspective in that it didn’t really cost anymore to be listed since they were already ICF members.

Conclusion

We introduced this topic by generically naming the organisations engaged in this activity as "Coach Referral Services." The popular understanding of this term would lead one to believe that they are services that match clients with coaches. However, from a thorough examination of the data, the term "coach referral service" does not accurately represent the nature of what these services provide. Only two services are truly "coach/client matching services," while others, associated with the largest and well-known organisations, are more accurately described as "coach listing services," “coach directories,” or “coach warehouses.”

A summary chart comparing the various services was created by Peer Resources in 2005, and was last updated in November, 2007. The chart provides information about the most reputable coach referral and coach/client matching services on the Internet, and is accessible at: <http://www.peer.ca/coachreferrals.html>

Over time clients and coaches will be able to provide feedback as to which services work best to meet their needs. The goal in developing the table and its continuous updates is to help coaches exercise caution about which services to use to help them find their ideal clients. We also want to assist clients to determine which services will actually provide them with their ideal coach.

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