

THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL MARKETING ON THE RECRUITMENT OF MARTIAL  
ARTS STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY OF TRIDENT ACADEMY OF MARTIAL  
ARTS

by

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A Project  
Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty  
of  
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## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to my loving wife, Pat, whose patience with my shortcomings is never-ending.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank the many friends, relatives, and supporters who have made this happen, especially my loving wife, Pat. My chair, Dr. Pierre Rodgers, and the other members of my committee, Dean Ellen Rodgers and Mr. Andrew Ruge, were of invaluable help. Thanks as well to Sifu Pat Tray, Ben Gilbert, Mikey Custodio and other staff and students at Trident Academy of Martial Arts for their support on this project and my journey as a martial artist.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL MARKETING ON THE RECRUITMENT OF MARTIAL ARTS STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY OF TRIDENT ACADEMY OF MARTIAL ARTS**

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George Mason University, 2016

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There is a broad array of recreational and fitness activities and options in which people can participate, among these is the study and practice of a martial art. How does the owner of a martial arts studio differentiate his or her school from all the other choices, either from other activities or even other martial arts facilities in the area? Without students, there can be no school. Once there are students in the program, how does a school retain them? The purpose of this study was to determine what factors impact the recruitment and retention of martial arts students. Does the use of digital marketing and other more “traditional” methods impact the operation of a martial arts school? Do they help, hinder or are they a “neutral steer” (i.e., no effect) in attracting new clients and maintaining the current base. There is little research dealing with digital marketing and martial arts schools specifically, or traditional methods for that matter. This research employed a case study approach focusing on a local martial arts studio, with interviews of the owner and program manager to identify the digital marketing methods they have used to recruit students, and the results of those methods. The results of the case study

indicated that further research is required to determine how, if at all, the student population was influenced by the methods employed.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Background

Participation in physical activities, recreation and sports in this United States has grown for a variety of reasons—from health and fitness to enjoyment and pleasure. Over 40 million children under the age of 18 participate in organized sports programs, such as football, baseball or soccer (Reference USA, 2014). Participation is also higher in individual sports activities (e.g., Crossfit, running, aerobics, hiking) and non sport-related pastimes such as reading or going to the movies. With a seemingly endless array of recreational activities from which to choose, how does any sports or recreational organization attract participants? Adults typically have more choices available to them than youth, although they also have more barriers and constraints that impact the time and resources available for participation in recreation and/or fitness. Among these activities are the study and practice of martial arts (including judo, karate, kung fu, taekwondo).

Along with the increase in the popularity of mixed martial arts (MMA) events, such as Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) and Pride Fighting Championship, the number of martial arts schools has grown, from approximately 14,500 in 2003 to over 17,000 in 2014 (Reference USA, 2014), resulting in an even more competitive marketplace. These numbers do not include the training that is offered at colleges or universities, or local clubs such as the YMCA. Even the UFC has its own branded training studios. While the number of schools and opportunities has increased, there are

indications in some studies that participation in the martial arts has actually seen a decrease and it may continue to fall (Kim et al., 2015). If this decrease does occur, the marketplace will become even more competitive.

Despite the plethora of information available (e.g., books, magazines, movies, websites), there remains much misinformation and misunderstanding of the martial arts (Ash, 2013). The number of people participating in the martial arts in the United States is about 6.9 million, an increase of 28% since 2004 (Kim, 2010). The number of families participating in martial arts training has also increased, although there has been little systemic research conducted to explain the reasons behind the growth (Lantz, 2002). Family-related incentives (e.g., discounts based on the number of family members) are prime methods that schools employ to attract students.

The members of any sports organization or business are its lifeblood, providing most of the revenue (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007). Similarly, students are key to the success of a martial arts studio, as they provide the main source of income for the school (Nelson, 2013). In light of increasing competition among providers, how does a school differentiate itself from others in the market, some of which may teach the same or similar styles of martial arts? What are the best methods to attract students, youth and adult? Once recruited, how does the school retain them? While retention of students is an important factor in the successful running of a martial arts studio (Kim et al., 2013), recruiting is key (Kim, 2010; Kim, Zhang, & Ko, 2009).

The first step to be considered in marketing a school is to know and understand the market, including the mix and make-up of the student body (e.g., adults or children,

group classes or one-on-one), as well as what leads people to make the choices that they do (Kim, 2010). In other words, “when managers have a more complete understanding of what obstacles impede the use of their services, they will be in a position to take necessary corrective actions” (Howard & Crompton, 1984, p. 43).

Ash (2013) provides a primer on choosing a school and/or a particular style (i.e., tae kwon do, kung fu or jujitsu). Twemlow, Lerma, and Twemlow (1996); Ko, Kim, and Valacich (2010); and Lantz (2012) researched the potential motivations for studying martial arts; self-defense, physical exercise, and improve self-confidence were typically the greatest motivations. Kim (2010) addressed the impact of market and consumer factors on the recruitment and retention of students, and identified increased competition in the market due to the growth in popularity of martial arts and understanding the target consumer audience.

Mangold and Faulds (2009) argue that social media, unlike the traditional methods of advertising and branding, is outside the control of the marketing manager and the authors discuss methods (e.g., blogs, social media tools, and promotional tools) by which managers can shape consumer discussions, assisting the organization to reach its goals and objectives. Hutchins (2010) notes that ‘tweeting,’ along with text messaging and instant messaging, are indicators of an accelerated information order; staying in touch without being in touch. Jue, Marr, and Kassotakis (2009) provide key practices - involve others for commitment, communicate to build trust, work the system, and generate momentum - for leveraging social media in order to build a more effective organization, engaging employees and sustaining competitiveness. Fitness industry

analysts see the use of social media as selling a lifestyle, not just a class, and “the better the instructor’s social media game, the more obsessive her fan base” (Ruiz, 2015, p. 122). Researchers have also examined daily deal sites such as Groupon (Dholakia, 2010, 2011; Edelman, Jaffe, & Kominers, 2014), which—for the purposes of this study—are considered part of the digital marketing mix. In some cases, the deals were beneficial for the business, but the long-term outlook for daily deal sites was generally not optimistic unless the deal sites make changes in their business models, especially the fees they charge, which in some cases is 50% of the deal.

To date, little research has focused on the use of digital marketing by martial arts schools for recruitment and retention purposes. Dougherty (2011) and Shababi (2011) addressed various aspects of the Internet and social media (e.g., websites, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram); their importance for marketing and recruitment; and the impact their use, or lack of, has on a studio. While these authors have discussed the impact of all types of digital marketing on the success or failure of a business, the research to date has been conducted by representatives of companies that provide software and marketing services for martial arts schools. While the information may be accurate, it must be considered as being somewhat self-serving and potentially biased. The general lack of martial arts school specific information regarding the success or failure of employing digital marketing tools necessitates further study.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of digital marketing on the recruitment and retention of martial arts students with a focus on one particular studio.

The project focused on a qualitative exploration of methods and techniques employed to recruit and retain students to determine which are used, for what purpose, and their success. From this initial exploration, the findings were used to develop a survey to be used in future research. The results of the survey will be analyzed to determine if the methods employed accomplished the intent of the schools in recruiting and retaining students or do the survey participants identify other factors.

## **Research Questions**

This research sought to investigate how digital marketing and other more “traditional” methods impact a martial arts school and whether these methods help, hinder or are a “neutral steer” (i.e., no effect) in attracting new clients and maintaining the current base.

One research question for this study was: Is the employment of digital marketing essential? If so, which applications? Is establishing a website sufficient or is maintaining a “cyber-presence” on other platforms important? Follow-up questions would be asked to gather additional information to determine which applications they employed, the reasons or purpose for employing each, the results gained or impact to the operation of the school, if any, of each application, and the return on investment for each. Another central research question will focus on methods, other than digital marketing, used to attract and retain students. The “traditional” methods employed by these types of schools include offering free lessons, multi-family member discounts, after school training/day care and others. Traditional methods would also include the advertising by way of the phone book, flyers and other “non-cyber” means.

The results of this study may inform decisions on the use of digital marketing as part of an overall marketing strategy, and assist studio owners in addressing recruitment and retention efforts.



## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

The intent of this study is to determine the impact of a martial arts school's use of digital media. This chapter will include a review of key literature related to motivation, recruitment and retention, and branding and marketing.

### **Motivation to Participate in Martial Arts**

Understanding the primary motivation of individuals to participate in martial arts training can play a significant role in client/student recruitment (Winzar et al., 2006) and a "...failure to understand the more subtle psychological motivations of students for pursuing martial arts may explain why it is often so hard to build a school to a functional size" (as cited in Twemlow, Lermar, & Twemlow, 1996, pp. 101-102).

Internationally, researchers have addressed the varied motivations of people who participate in martial arts (e.g., Twemlow, et al., 1996; Zaggelidis et al., 2004, Stefanek, 2004; Jones et al., 2006 Zeng et al., 2015; Parnabas et al., 2015). These studies have been limited either in number of participants or martial arts examined. There are differences and similarities in the conclusions regarding motivations for participation. Additionally, some of these studies were undertaken outside the United States (Zaggelidis et al., 2004; Jones et al., 2006; Parnabas et al., 2015) and cultural differences may need to be factored in to the results. Twemlow et al. (1996) surveyed 170 students, ranging in age from 5 to 63 years, on why they chose to practice karate; the majority did so for self-defense. In contrast, Zaggelidis et al. (2004), in a study of 103 students with various experience in martial arts of judo and karate, found that interest in the sport, health benefits and

character cultivation were the primary motives. Jones et al. (2006) identified motivations of affiliation, friendship and fitness. In a recent study of 75 taekwondo students from 7 schools/dojos in New York City, Zeng et al. (2015) concluded there were four intrinsic motivations (i.e., value, enjoyment, self-esteem, and physical needs) and four extrinsic motivations (i.e., develop skills, establish prestige, build-up friendship, and win contests). In another one of the few studies aimed specifically at the martial arts, Ko, et al. (2010) studied the potential consumer motivations of 307 martial artists and found the three most important reasons for participation were fun, physical fitness and aesthetics.

The goal of Winzar et al. (2006) was to replicate the study by Twemlow et al. (1996) and “produce a reliable instrument for measurement of an individual’s intention to study the martial arts with the purpose of developing customized marketing communications for different motivational profiles” (p. 2). The study produced a list of seven factors that may motivate students’ desire to study a martial art: physical exercise, self-confidence, discipline, spiritual practice, meditation, aggression outlet, and fun.

How do students manifest their motivation to study a martial art? According to Wolfe (2006a), potential students often first make contact with a school by telephone and this initial phone call may be the best time to identify the student’s motivations. Wolfe (2006a, p. 1) recommends, “Don’t even answer the caller’s first question...Regardless of what is asked, respond with ‘What are you looking for in your training?’ This question will provide a clear picture of what is motivating the potential student to seek martial arts training.”

Understanding the consumer is important for maintaining and fostering the growth of an industry (Ko, et al., 2010), but it also important to understand the market and the elements of product, place, pricing and promotion (Ko, 2002; 2003). The growth in the number of martial arts schools has resulted in increased competition. It is important for the management of schools to understand the environment in which the business is operating, including market demand, perceived value, member satisfaction, and member commitment (Kim, 2010). How does a school tap into the student's motivation and entice him to come the school?

### **Methods to Recruit and Retain**

Martial arts schools have used the more "traditional" methods of attracting students, including offering free lessons, multi-family member discounts, after school training/day care, among others. Traditional methods also include advertising by way of the phone book, flyers, and other "non-cyber" means.

The reasons children participate in sport is typically addressed by five factors: perception of competence; fun and enjoyment; parent's influence; learning new skills; and friends and peers. How coaches teach and the environments they establish have an impact on continued participation (Bailey et al., 2013). Student motivation to participate is also influenced by the instructor's style (Jones et al., 2006).

As with other businesses, martial arts studios are embracing the Internet and social media applications as part of their strategy to attract new customers. The number of small businesses using social media has doubled since 2008 (Taneja & Tombs, 2014). Most, if not all, the information available relating to digital marketing applications to

martial arts schools is found in commercial publications or websites, for example, *Black Belt* magazine articles written by representatives of companies which offer products and services in the cyber environment. The executive editor of *Black Belt* magazine himself espoused the importance of digital marketing to the continued success and even existence of the magazine (Young, 2013). In one four month period, the magazine's Facebook followers quadrupled to 250,000. The editor attributed the growth to the ability of the public to comment on posts, with many attracting 500 to 1000 comments (Young, 2014), although commenting on posts may not lead to an increase in actual participation at a school.

Social networks act to spread reviews of schools or studios by electronic word of mouth, allowing the sharing of information. The ability to find a school and establish a relationship with the business and instructors may influence the potential clients' decision to enroll in classes (Kicksite, 2013). These networks also allow schools to stay connected with students and the parents of younger students. Sharing news and events (including promotions) engage the audience and help increase student retention (Roberts, 2012). Online marketing, free passes, and flyers may be some of the best ways to market a school; satisfied customers are the quickest way to grow a school's student population. These students spread the word, attracting new students; and if they are happy with the program, they stay (Massie, 2016). Social networks act as amplifiers, increasing the reach of information as well as the speed at which it travels.

Dougherty (2011) found that consumers would use social media to obtain information about products, services and memberships. According to Mangold and

Faulds (2009), the Internet is the number one source of media for consumers at work and the number two source at home. Many consider the website to be the new “front door” for their school or business, and it is often the first method by which potential clients encounter the school. Even before customers find the physical location of a studio, they will often have located information online. The web may be the best place to showcase the business, but the site must catch the potential students’ attention quickly, perhaps within the first eight seconds before they click away (Shababi, 2011).

Which digital marketing application is the most important or effective? A website is the best place to showcase a business online, but must link new content on the website through other digital marketing channels (Shababi, 2011). Such other channels (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) are where clients will communicate with each other about the school and share information and opinions with other users. This will result in additional leads, viewers and, hopefully, new students (Shababi, 2011). Whatever the method employed to attract new clients, the average consumer must see a particular product or service (e.g., website, flyer, phone book advertisement), at least three times before a purchase decision is made (Wolfe, 2006b).

Most school operators or business owners would agree that advertising is an essential element in the establishment and growth of that school or business. Advertising includes brochures, flyers, phone book and newspaper ads, an in-house referral program, the Internet and other means. Whatever the means, it is important to measure the effectiveness of the marketing plan overall and which methods provide the best return on investment (Wolfe, 2006b).

## **Branding and Marketing**

Digital marketing is used frequently by sports organizations to communicate with fans thereby building their customer base. Many consider using digital marketing (including social media) as an absolute requirement in the current business environment (Weinberg & Pehlivan, 2011; Baird & Parasnis, 2011). Use of social media may not always play the role expected. In a study of 10 marketing techniques designed to increase participation in intramural athletics at a large Midwest university, social media was the least effective as the message was viewed as being impersonal or lost in the clutter of the medium, other forms of communication (e.g., website and email) were more effective (Ciuffo, Johnson, & Tracy, 2014). While Edelman (2010) found that overuse of the Internet can result in overexposure, resulting in the message being ignored by the target audience. LaPointe (2012) noted that social media plays a more important role in the retention of customers than in attracting new ones.

Pedersen et al. (2010) acknowledged the role that relationship marketing, community alliances, and mass communications play in marketing and branding of professional sports organizations although less has been directed at the more recent media developments.

The tools and strategies for communication with customers has changed significantly with the emergence of social media, also referred to as consumer-generated media (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). This type of media allows one person to communicate with hundreds or even thousands of people regarding companies and their products and services. Traditional sources of advertising - radio, television, magazines and newspapers

- are less of a source of information for consumers, as individuals and organizations turn more toward social media to conduct searches for information in order to assist them with purchasing decisions. Social media should be a part of companies marketing strategy in order to engage and attract customers.

In 2010, Twitter had 100 million users, while in 2012 – just prior to its initial public offering (IPO) – there were 232 million monthly active users (Hutchins, 2011). These huge numbers point to the potential scope and reach of digital marketing applications. The use of these social communications tools, particularly web-based or “instant” communication (e.g., blogs and Twitter), can help organizations market more efficiently and effectively. It is important for sports organizations to convert interest generated by digital marketing into commitment or action, achieving some type of financial gain in the form of membership, merchandise or attendance (O’Shea & Alonso, 2011). Individual athletes directly communicating with fans using Twitter, illustrates the power of this tool in personal branding (Hutchins, 2011). Digital marketing presents opportunities to build relationships and engage with customers. Many companies are investing more in online programs and believe Internet is essential for customer engagement. This customer engagement may turn customers into fans (Sashi, 2012).

Many companies have used daily deal sites such as Groupon and Living Social and others in an effort to advertise and attract new customers. These types of deals are attractive to consumers, as deeply discounted prices allow customers to try new places or experiences at low risk. Businesses believe that these promotions draw many new customers in a very efficient manner. At one point, there was a waiting list of over 35,000

businesses nationwide which wanted to be advertised on the Groupon site (Dholakia, 2010). Its apparent success spawned a host of competitors (e.g., LivingSocial, TravelZoo, BuyWithMe), although by 2013, much of the previous enthusiasm had worn off (Edelman, Jaffe, & Kominers, 2014). Dholakia (2011) offered that it was difficult for any of these sites to stand out from the others and there were a number of “red flags” such as lack of enthusiasm on the part of business to run another deal in the future, that could impact the daily deal industry as whole and may point to a decreasing or changing use of this type of communication strategy.

If a school employs digital marketing, what role and impact, if any, does a school’s cyber-presence have on consumer motivations to start or continue training? Has it become generally accepted that digital marketing plays not only an important role in the marketing arena, but also that these applications are an absolute requirement in the present and foreseeable business climate?

In the previously cited studies (Twemlow, et al., 1996; Zaggelidis et al., 2004, Stefanek, 2004; Jones et al., 2006; Zeng et al., 2015; Parnabas et al., 2015), researchers examined the motivations of students to join and train in specific martial arts (e.g., karate or judo). The identified motivations varied based on age, gender, location and other factors. Understanding the motivation of potential and active students seems to play a role in the recruitment and retention and could impact a school’s marketing.

Martial arts schools continue to employ traditional marketing methods, advertising and recruitment tools: free lessons, discounts, flyers, phone book advertisements and others. Schools are also embracing the methods to reach potential



clients through cyber-space whether with a Facebook page, an Instagram account or some other site or application. At a minimum, an active website would seem to be a necessity. How important a role do other cyber means play in increasing and maintaining a student population?

As noted above, digital marketing has been shown to play a role in branding and marketing for businesses, sports organizations and individuals. Many would consider a cyber presence to be a required part of a marketing plan, but indications are that it can be a dual-edged sword that can attract potential clients or cause current customers to leave if negative reviews or comments become widespread.

The current study looked specifically at the impact of digital marketing as a method to attract and retain students. Does it affect the potential students' motivation to join or the current students' to continue to train? Does a martial arts studio's continued existence and growth depend solely on its digital marketing plan? This case study focused on one school, and attempted to address the impact of digital marketing on the recruitment of students and their retention. The case study will allow for a closer examination of the methods and means employed and potentially assist in determining where the school should focus its future efforts. There is no question that the school is growing. Is digital marketing part of the reason?

### **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of digital marketing on the recruitment and retention of students. To do so, a case study was conducted wherein “a particular individual, program, or event is studied in depth” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013, p. 141). In particular, the Trident Academy of Martial Arts served as the unit of study. This methodology allowed the researcher to identify “unique or exceptional qualities” which “can promote understanding or inform practice for similar situations” (i.e., other martial arts schools) (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013, p. 141). Additionally, a case study “can be appropriate for investigating how a...program changes over time, perhaps as the result of certain conditions or interventions” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013, p. 141). The genesis of the idea for this study was the return of one of the school owner’s first students. This alumni assumed the role of program manager and greatly expanded the school’s use of digital marketing. Subsequently, the school experienced the relatively rapid growth of its student population.

As stated above, the goal of the study was to determine how much, if any, impact the employment of digital marketing contributed to the increase in the student population and retention of members. Interviews were conducted with the Trident Academy of Martial Arts program manager (located in Northern Virginia). These interviews occurred before and after classes in which the researcher was participating, either as a student or instructor. The discussion focused on questions such as: what results did the school administration expect to achieve from employing digital marketing methods and what

were the actual results, if known? Did the use of digital marketing and other more “traditional” methods, if used, impact the number of students who participate in classes at the school? Did the use of these methods help, hinder or were they a “neutral steer” (i.e., no effect) in attracting new clients and maintaining the current base? The interviews were guided by the questions in Appendix A, although subsequent interactions constituted reengagements to clarify information or ask follow-up questions. Responses were analyzed to identify the methods used to recruit and retain students at the school and the reason(s) these methods were chosen.

In addition to conducting interviews, the researcher was granted administrator privileges for the school’s Facebook page and the program manager’s Google Analytics account, as well as manager privileges for the school’s student tracking program, Mindbody (<https://www.mindbodyonline.com/>) – an online business management software program. Such access allowed the researcher to examine historical statistics. The Facebook page provided information on viewer interactions, such as how many times a post was “liked” or shared with other users. Google Analytics included information on the number of viewers who found the school’s website, and their search process. The data in Mindbody provided insight into the composition of the Trident Academy of Martial Arts student body. This information, in conjunction with what was learned during the interviews, sheds light on the possible link between digital marketing strategies and the recruitment and retention of students.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: A CASE STUDY OF THE TRIDENT ACADEMY**

### **History**

Trident Academy of Martial Arts was originally located in the owner's backyard, at least as a concept, in 1997. The owner, at that time, was still serving on active duty in the United States military, and served as the martial arts trainer for his military unit. The idea for the school came into being based on his perspective. The first brick and mortar school was established in Woodbridge, Virginia, along the Interstate 95 corridor in 1998, while the owner was serving his final tour of duty in the military.

For many years, the school had a stable number of students for all styles taught, although the class sizes were relatively small. One of the owner's early students, returned to the area in August 2013, after having served in the United States Army. At that time, he became the school's program manager. He remains the primary decision maker and is responsible for implementing marketing efforts, including digital marketing employment, with limited input from the school's owner. The program manager has been instrumental in instituting processes, many of which are aimed at recruitment and retention of students. Developing a marketing plan was one of his first projects, including an emphasis on building and spreading a robust social media presence. He revamped the website to make it more dynamic with links to social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Once established or reestablished, and in order to be effective, the content on all of these platforms must be regularly updated. Other sites and applications also played a part in the marketing process, for example You Tube, Yelp, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Google+, and Thumbtack. Of course, more traditional methods have

played a role in the school's attempts to recruit and retain students. These methods included introductory specials, family, "refer a friend" and package discounts, and advertising in the form of flyers, business cards, yellow pages and even a "moving billboard" (Figure 1).

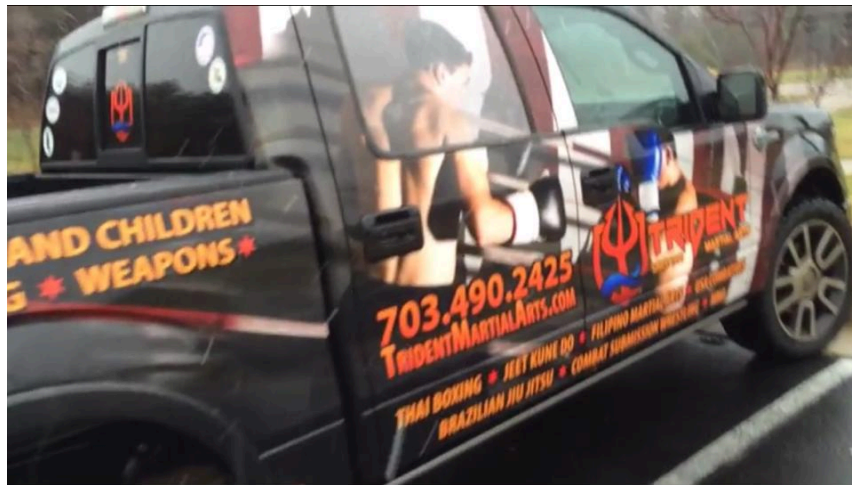


Figure 1 Mobile Billboard

Prior to his return to the school, the website was relatively static and the school had little to no presence on social media. The program manager also revamped and revitalized record keeping and built the school's student database. The records created prior to his return are neither complete nor very accurate.

Since assuming this administrative role, the size of the student body has grown tremendously; so much so, the school had to move to a larger location. For some classes, the number of participants still pushes space limits. The year before his return, the school had 99 new student enrollment; and during his first year, 197 new students joined the

school. The school's database currently lists over 400 active students. As a result of ongoing growth, the school has expanded into an adjacent part of the complex, which resulted in a doubling of the mat space available for training and classes. Much of this apparent success in attracting new students may be ascribed to the program manager's personality and drive. He is outgoing, deals well with people, and is a good salesman.

### **Programs and Rates**

The school offers programs for adults and children (ages 4-12) in various combinations and packages. The martial arts available for adults include:

- Muay Thai
- Jeet Kune Do (JKD)
- JTX (a mix of JKD and Muay Thai)
- Krav Maga
- Brazillian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ)
- Combat Submission Wrestling (CSW)
- Filipino Martial Arts

There are a half-dozen other martial arts schools within a two-mile radius of Trident Academy, the majority of which offer karate or taekwondo programs. No school within the school's market area, which the owner considers 5 miles, offers all the arts that can be found at Trident Academy, and few, if any schools in the Northern Virginia area offer as diverse a range of programs.

Adult students enroll in one of three groups; Striking, which includes Muay Thai, JKD, JTX and Krav Maga; Ground, consisting of BJJ and CSW; and Weapons, which is technically only the Filipino Martial Arts (or Kali) but students are often able to also participate in Krav Maga classes as these also employ weapons. Once students choose a group, they can elect to attend 3, 6, or unlimited classes per week in their group. They also have the option to enroll for a month, 3 months, or 6 months with the longer periods offering a more enticing financial incentive. There is also the option to combine all 3 programs in the same manner. The program manager often customizes programs to meet the needs of potential students based on their work schedule or other constraints.

Youth enroll in either the Junior Trident or Lil' Warrior programs, depending on age. Those programs include classes in Muay Thai or BJJ, and students participate in 2 classes per week or unlimited classes. Trident also offers an advance ground program for youth. This consists of a competition team with its own schedule for practices and the opportunity to compete in grappling events around the country.

### **Digital Marketing**

The program manager has intentionally increased the presence of the school in cyberspace. Information about the school, its programs and student participation, can be found on its new and continually updated webpage (<http://www.tridentmartialarts.com/>), Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/tridentmmaacademy/>), Twitter account (<https://twitter.com/triacadmma>, Instagram site (<https://www.instagram.com/tridentmma>),) as well as a number of other social media sites (e.g., Yelp, Google+, Vimeo).

The most visible use of digital marketing is the school's Facebook page. The program manager considers it to be a fast, user-friendly method of spreading the word and sharing current events, student promotions and upcoming special events and seminars. It is a virtual word of mouth to students' family, friends and acquaintances. Facebook results are measurable and easy to track—what gets shared or liked more often. Individual promotion photos are among the most shared. The program manager controls and posts to the page. Employing the site also provides a quicker method to reach a large portion of the student population. The site, Facebook.com, indexes very well on search engines such as Google; as a result, the school's page is highly visible to potential clients who are conducting searches for places to train. The site also provides the opportunity for current students to review the school and, according to the program manager, 20% of clients specifically cite these reviews as a deciding factor in choosing to try the program. Communication between students and the school, in between classes, has increased with the presence on Facebook; according to the program manager, approximately 30% of students ask questions on Facebook, rather than picking up the phone or asking in person.

The school also employs YouTube, a global video sharing website, in order to showcase the school's products and staff. The use of videos aids students in retention of information and as a reference for training at home, while also encouraging students to return to class. Additionally, videos help boost the ranking of the main school website in search engine results; shared videos result in increased interaction and exposure; and, as an alternative method of recruitment, users can search for "martial arts woodbridge va" on YouTube rather than on a search engine like Google.



Yelp is a crowd-sourced local business review and social networking site that can be accessed via a website, Yelp.com, and a mobile application. The school has an established page on Yelp for a number of reasons. Business pages on Yelp show well on search engines. The program manager feels that the site has a reputation of being used by “serious” shoppers, who are ready to buy. The site also allows the school to announce and offer deals and specials. For example, it currently offers a 43% discount voucher and \$10 off if a student purchases a 12-class pass. Data indicates only two students have taken advantage of the offers, a number of students, with whom the researcher trains, have identified Yelp as how they found the school.

Instagram is an on-line mobile photo sharing, video-sharing and social networking service. Employing the capability to share videos and photos, the school uses the site to share visual aids, products and information. The younger students—teens and twenty-somethings—have a tendency to use Instagram more than Facebook, in the opinion of the program manager. The site assists the school in maintaining contact with students and parents. Similar to YouTube, it assists with retention as pictures and videos are shared or commented on, which also makes it a recruitment tool.

Google+ is an interest-based social network. Establishing a page on this site has helped support the school’s ranking on the Google search engine, since it is part of the Google family of applications and sites. Being part of Google, the site also supports the use of Google maps and business listings during searches. This assists potential clients looking for the school, as well as presenting contact information and hours of operation.

The site also allows for the posting of reviews, which helps to validate the program to potential students.

Since the program manager's return to the school, the student population has more than tripled, increasing from approximately 120 to over 400 at the present time. This increase necessitated moving the school to a new and bigger location in order to accommodate the larger class sizes. Since the move, the increase has continued and the school has acquired an additional 2000 square feet of mat area in an adjoining space. Is the growth due to the school's increased presence in cyber-space or do clients learn about the school in other ways? Once customers walk through the front door and participate in a couple of classes, why do they sign up for more? Is the program manager a really good salesman? Is it the classes that are offered or the instructors and how they teach and relate to the students? If they stay, why do they stay? Does digital marketing have any impact on their decision or are there other reasons?

### **Enrollments and Membership**

Data regarding enrollments and management is currently limited. For many years, record keeping was inconsistent and the database programs used to capture the data varied from year to year. The most recent program used by the school, Mindbody, became active in November 2014; data or information captured prior to that date is still resident in other programs and hardware systems, although much of it has been transferred. Data is collected, but remains incomplete related to referrals. New students often do not provide an answer to how they found the school (e.g., webpage, Facebook, Yellow Pages, referred by a friend) or it was not recorded and entered into the system.

Students may also be double counted in Mindbody as a result of the manner in which the program tracks contracts or how those contracts are structured.

From 1998 through most of 2014 (prior to the switch to Mindbody), the number one source of new students was “walk-ins.” A total of 1251 potential students walked-in to the studio, of which 45% enrolled in classes and 29 (2%) are still listed on the rolls as active students. Did over 1200 people just happen to see the storefront and decide to come inside, without having looked for this school, or any school for that matter? There is probably no way to know the answer to that question. It is telling, however, that the data available since that time, corresponding to the return of the program manager, indicates there have been a total of 7 “walk-ins” out of the list of 416 current students. There is no data to indicate if there were more people in this category who walked in, but did not sign up for classes. Is this an indication of better record keeping or are students using other means to find the school? Interestingly, the change in the school’s location has reduced its visibility. The school had been located in a shopping center with many other stores and restaurants, and its store front signage was highly visible. Its current location is in a smaller complex with fewer businesses. The “feel’ of the location gives one the impression that customers know where it is and come there with purpose, whether to Trident or one of the others storefronts. The school name is visible from a major roadway, but at nearly a quarter mile away. Signage alone is unlikely to draw passerby’s to the school.

The second largest group of students from 1998 through 2014, 53%, came to the school as a result of the school’s website. From this group, 39% enrolled in classes and

5% of these remain on the rolls. Out of the currently active students, 59 (14.1%) specifically listed being referred by the school’s website, and 149 (35.6%) of current students identify “Google search” as the referral source. As this type of search typically results in locating the website, this would seem to indicate that nearly half (49.7%) of the current students “found” the school by way of its “cyber-storefront.” This is the leading source of students since the program manager’s return in October 2013.

Other than using a search engine, how did potential students find the website? The program manager uses Google Analytics in an attempt to track this information. The following tables, from April and May 2016, are examples of the available data.

**Table 1 Network Referrals 11-17 April 2016**

Referrer	Sessions	Page views
Facebook	72	113
Yelp	7	34
Twitter	2	2
Blogger	1	1

**Table 2 Network Referrals 16-22 May 2016**

Referrer	Sessions	Page views
Facebook	12	27
Yelp	4	10
Reddit	1	1
Blogger	1	1

The tables show the number of times (sessions) the website was visited as a result of a link or reference on a digital marketing site, and the number of pages on the website which were viewed. Google Analytics indicates that these other digital marketing sites were the third largest source of visits to the school’s website (20%) during the first six

months of 2016. This reinforces the “dominance” of Facebook with nearly 92% of the traffic generated by digital marketing applications/sites to the website flowing from Facebook. The next closest was Yelp at less than 4%.

Does a high number of visits or sessions on the website cause an increase in new students? According to Google Analytics, March 2016 saw the highest number of sessions on the schools website, nearly 3000. March also recorded the highest number of referrals to the website on one day, almost 4 times more than any other day; 90% of these referrals came from Facebook as a result of the initial announcement of a seminar to be held at the school by the world renowned Guro Dan Inosanto, one of Bruce Lee’s training partners. The student body increased in March, but only by 7 members. For the year to date, May had the lowest number of visits to the website but the number of students increased by nearly 20.

Data available on the school’s Facebook page indicate a steady increase in “page likes” (followers of the page) with 521 in July 2014 (the earliest available) to 1292 at the time of this writing, an increase of 150%. More users became aware of and followed the site at the same time the student population increased. However, the current data indicates that only 1.4% (6) of the students currently enrolled listed Facebook as the source of their referral to the school. The overall numbers seem to indicate at least some correlation between the growth in the number of students and the increase of digital marketing awareness (followers) but not causation; and if this is “true” for the leading digital marketing application, how much impact could any of the others had on the student population?

How about traditional methods of marketing? The available data does not capture the full range of methods employed by the school, with only two categories that could be considered “traditional”. Ninety-two (22%) of the current students were referred by another client. An additional 54 students (12.9%) were referred by a “trusted friend,” although there is no indication that these friends were also students. “Refer a friend” is one of the methods the school used to attract new clients.

The program manager also modified one of the school’s traditional marketing efforts. The first two classes had previously been offered on a free trial basis in an attempt to attract new clients; that option is now only available if the prospective student is a friend or family member of a current student. Otherwise, trial classes are offered for a fee, although at a greatly reduced rate. This change was made to limit the growth of the student body to prevent classes from becoming too large and unmanageable. Students continue to sign-up for trial classes.

In the past, the program manager used a discount price site, Groupon in 2013, in an attempt to attract new clients. It resulted in 15 responses of which three enrolled. It was not viewed as a worthwhile method of recruitment and was not repeated.

The school also employed what some would consider a non-traditional method. One of the classes taught at the school was USA Combatives, a street self-defense program. Classes in this program were not as well attended as others. In an attempt to attract more students, the school decided to change the name to Tier One Krav Maga. The art of Krav Maga, has a reputation for being realistic and functional and many people recognize it as the martial art of the Israeli military. It has also been very well marketed

in the United States and is very popular at this time. The name itself is Hebrew for “contact-combat,” which is the same as combatives, yet the Krav Maga appears to be more enticing. The technique worked and these classes have more students. Students generally sign up for programs in striking, grappling, or weapons. They can also enroll in an unlimited program, in which they can participate in any class. Krav Maga classes are considered part of the striking *and* weapons program. As a result, tracking the actual success of the name change is problematic.

Although the school has employed many methods to attract students, the website seems to be the number one entry point to the school. Did the digital marketing program lead them to the website? The data would indicate that was true for some clients but how much real impact digital marketing has had on recruitment is difficult to ascertain.

The impact of marketing strategies on retention is even more difficult to identify. Tracking retention itself can prove problematic, if for no other reason, due to the manner in which data has been captured over time. As previously mentioned, student data, since November 2014, is contained in Mindbody. The first month that actually shows student records is December 2014; at that time, 154 students listed were listed. Of that number, 60 (39%) have active contracts. Does having an active contract equate to an active student? One of the 60 students has not attended a session in over three months. This example demonstrates the potential difficulties in even identifying retention using only data. Attempting to read the impact of digital marketing on retention in the “tea leaves” of statistics is an even more daunting challenge. When a student signs up for classes, he/she is asked how they found the school. There is no corresponding question for

retained students when they renew their contract. The majority of contracts are set up to automatically renew.



## CHAPTER FIVE: RESULTS

The intent of this study was to determine the impact of a martial art school's use of digital marketing. Do any of the methods employed by the school, whether traditional or social media, impact the school's ability to attract and subsequently retrain students? Intuitively, one feels there must be some connection between the growth of the school's population and its social media efforts and other marketing techniques. The school has had to move to a larger location and further expand to accommodate the growth in the number of students. If there is no evidence for causality in the available data, a case could be made for correlation; as the school's presence in cyberspace has increased, so too has the number of students. Shorter time frames, particular months for example, have seen large growth despite less activity on social media outlets and little growth with heavy interaction on social media. The impact of social media on the retention of students is even less clear.

Despite the apparent lack of available data that directly attributes the growth to the school's social media efforts, there are at least indications that many people find the school by some sort of cyber means. The school's website seemed to be the largest contributor to the growth with almost half of the student body indicating that they found the school by way of the website. Once they have found the school, the question still remains: what actually causes them sign up, or not, for additional classes?

Social interaction can play a role in recruitment. A new student was participating in one of her first introductory classes. Prior to the class, the instructor, who is no longer

at the school, ignored her. He did not show her where to place her bag, inform her of the class routine, tell her what equipment she would require, and if she did not have own equipment, provide her with it from the school's gear. In short, he did not make her feel welcome and she did not return for any more classes. Had he been more forthcoming and friendly, it might have made a difference. Does social interaction also play a pivotal role in the student's decision to stay? A general lack of data and mostly anecdotal information indicates a need for additional research into both recruiting and retention.

### **Further Research**

Administering a survey would be a logical next step for the studio. Using the information collected during interviews, interactions with the school staff, and site analysis led to the development of a draft survey (see Appendix B) that can be administered to adult students and parents of youth students. The survey should be used to determine possible connections between digital marketing and recruitment and retention. Further, the school can use results to gather information regarding client satisfaction with the school and its programs. Due to the size of the school population (~400), a survey will be the easiest and most efficient means to gather information. All students and/or parents should be administered the survey at a regular interval or key transition time (e.g., conclusion of a contract). Prior to distributing the survey, it is recommended that the program manager reach out, by various media (e.g., email, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and signage around the school) to inform the school population about the survey and request their participation. The survey will assess the

factors that influence consumers to join and/or remain in the programs offered by the studio.

One school was the focus of this study; however, further research should consider other such schools to determine generalizability of results. Are such businesses routinely using websites, Facebook, Twitter and other cyber-tools in an attempt to recruit and retain students? Other methods?

Further research should also include developing a better understanding of the information available in the data captured in Google Analytics and Facebook. This case study should prompt further analysis. A better understanding of this information could assist the school, as well as other schools, to recognize the potential power of digital marketing as a recruitment and retention tool, and the best means to employ social applications.

### **Limitations**

The researcher became familiar with the school as a student, initially in the Filipino Art of Kali, and subsequently all of the striking arts taught at the school. There were many weeks when he was at the school almost as often as members of the staff. Eventually this led to becoming an unpaid instructor for two scheduled classes. In exchange, he no longer paid tuition for the classes he attended as a student. At this time, he is on the staff, receiving monetary compensation for teaching classes, (both scheduled classes and private lessons). Despite what one might see as obvious potential for bias, familiarity with the studio and trust from the owner and program manager facilitated the study. Every effort has been made to remain objective.

Another limitation is the availability of data. Information available prior to October 2013, and the program manager's return, is suspect at best. Additionally, the current information gathering and storing process can best be considered a "work in progress," as there have been multiple changes in the actual programs used to collect and store data and a relatively recent adoption of Google Analytics for analysis and understanding. This is an ongoing learning process that competes with the program manager's other duties as an instructor and father to 8 children.

At this point, it is worthwhile to address a limitation that will have more impact during future research, primarily understanding those individuals who are no longer at the school. There is great potential for gathering more information from current students and the parents of youth regarding the reasons they joined and why they continue to attend classes. Such reasons may indicate digital marketing's impact, the influence of friends, the reputation of the owner (the researcher has heard him described as "legendary") or perhaps the manner in which the classes are conducted. For some, the reasons for joining and continuing at the Trident Academy are mixed. What the survey will not be able to address are the students who are no longer students. Why did they leave? Did they leave or are they away for a period of time? A different survey will be required to track former students who are no longer participants at the Trident Academy. This information will be very helpful in addressing changes necessary at the school, and proactively increasing retention.

## **Conclusions**

The intent of this study was to determine the impact of digital marketing on a martial arts school. Without a doubt, digital media applications have an impact, and exert influence, on martial arts schools' students, just as they do in all other facets of life. Students and parents enjoy when the school shares student promotions, and they, in turn, share with their friends and family. All this activity undoubtedly assists the marketing and branding of the school, which may attract potential students. How much actual influence it has on recruitment and retention remains to be determined. This case study illustrates a possible (direct) correlation between the growth in the school's student population and the school's expanded presence in cyberspace. There remains question as to the impact of such marketing strategies on retention. Additionally, understanding motivations to participation is key to recruitment and retention. Further research must focus on the underlying motivations of current and potential Trident Academy of Martial Arts students.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **Interview Guide**

1. What social media applications do you use to recruit and retain students at your martial arts school?
2. Why did you choose these applications?
3. What impact did you expect these applications to have on recruitment and retention?
4. What impact did they have on recruitment and retention?
5. What was the return on investment for each application?

## APPENDIX B

Draft Survey

### **Trident Academy Social Media Online Survey**

**This survey is being conducted to better understand Trident Academy's student population, as well as the impact of social media on it. Please take a few minutes to complete this survey fully. Your answers will remain completely confidential. Responses will only be considered in the aggregate; no individual data will be released. Your answers will help us provide a better social media experience.**

**Q1. What is your current membership status at Trident Academy?**

- Adult student**
- Parent of a youth student**

**Q2. How long have you or your child been a member at Trident?**

- less than 6 months**
- 6-12 months**
- \_\_ years (please specify the number of years)**

**Q3. In which programs at Trident do you or your child currently participate?  
(Check all that apply).**

- Striking**
- Weapons**
- Grappling**
- Krav Maga/Combatives**
- Youth competition team**

**Q4. What were your primary motivations for beginning to study martial arts? (Check all that apply)**

- Self Defense**
  - Fitness**
  - Social aspect (Meet people)**
  - Confidence**
  - Competition**
  - Other (please specify):**
-



**Q5. How did you first hear about Trident Academy? (Check all that apply)**

- Yellow Pages**
- Internet search engine**
- Word of mouth**
  - Friend**
  - Family member**
  - Other (please specify):**

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- Social Media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)**
  - Facebook**
  - Twitter**
  - Instagram**
  - Youtube**
  - Google+**
  - Discount coupon (please specify):**

- Other (please specify):**

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- Signage on the Academy**
- Other (please specify):**

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**Q6. Why did you decide to enroll yourself or your child in classes at the Trident Academy? (Check all that apply)**

- Introductory trial classes**
  - Multi-family member discount**
  - Discount coupon program**
  - Reputation/word of mouth**
  - Observation**
  - Social media exposure**
  - Other (please specify):**
- 

**Q7. Why have you, or your child, continued to train at Trident? (Check all that apply)**

- Instructors**  
**Please explain:** \_\_\_\_\_
- Atmosphere**  
**Please explain:** \_\_\_\_\_
- Variety of classes**  
**Please explain:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Class schedule**  
Please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

**Location**  
Please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

**Convenience**  
Please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

**Other**  
Please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

**Q8. How many times a week do you train at Trident?**

\_\_\_ times per week

**Q9. Do you feel that the current class schedule meets your training needs?**

**Yes**

**No**

**If not, please explain:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Q10. Do you follow Trident on social media?**

Yes

No

**If yes, which forms? (Check all that apply)**

Facebook

Twitter

Instagram

Youtube

Google+

Other (please specify):

---

**Q11. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement:**

**Trident's social media presence has influenced my (or my child's) continued participation at Trident?**

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

**Q12. How likely are you to recommend Trident Academy to a friend or family member?**

- Highly Likely**
- Likely**
- Unlikely**
- Highly Unlikely**

**Q13. Overall, how satisfied are you with the program and schedule at Trident Academy?**

- Very Satisfied**
- Satisfied**
- Not Satisfied**
- Very Not Satisfied**

**Q14. Age**

---

**Q15. GENDER**

- Male**
- Female**

**Q16. List your race.**

---

**Q17. List highest level of education achieved.**

---

**Q18. Rate your overall health.**

- Very Poor**
- Poor**
- Good**
- Very Good**

DRAFT

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

James T. Conklin graduated from Blair Academy in Blairstown, New Jersey in 1978. He received his Bachelor of Science from Tulane University in 1982. After graduation, he was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps, and earned a Master of Science in Strategic Studies from the Marine Corps University. He retired as a Colonel of Marines in 2008.