



PHOTOS BY ERIKA TAYLOR

Family Man

Bob Hubbard has built the gold standard of swim schools with superior customer service that makes clients feel like they're part of the family | by Rin-rin Yu

Bob Hubbard knows the names of all his children. That may not seem like much of a feat, until you consider the number of kids in Hubbard's fold: 2,500. That's how many children float, kick and stroke through the Hubbard Family Swim School each year. And while Hubbard and his wife, Kathy, haven't actually raised them, they consider these kids part of their extended family.

It's a family that just seems to keep growing. Now closing in on six years, the Phoenix school's attendance has grown nearly exponentially. What started with 400 children in 1999 has exploded to 2,500. And Hubbard doesn't just know the names of every single one of these children — he also knows the names of their parents and each of their occupations.

But for Hubbard, keeping track of so many personal details doesn't feel like work at all. "If you have a hard job, and you have a love for it, you fall into it easily," Hubbard says.

Maybe, but it's still a mystery to his wife how Hubbard brings it all together.

"The first three years we worked together were very hellacious," she says. "I'd be like, 'Where are you going? What are you doing?' Then three months later, suddenly we had a huge group come in. That's what he's been doing. He makes it work."

But Hubbard is not one to brag about such successes. Standing 6'1" with a head of curly gray hair and a jovial smile, he seems more at home splashing around with kids than puttering around in the office. His wife calls him "gregarious."

That lively spirit infiltrates the small, attentive classes that Hubbard says are key to a child's swimming progress as well as that of a swim school's. His classes have no more than eight children, which allow instructors to focus on a child's development. The other secret to his success is low staff turnover, with instructors who love teaching children as much as he does. Two of his original four instructors are still on the payroll. And this year, 98 percent of their summer part-timers are expected to return.

Though Hubbard makes it look easy, he's the first to admit it's not. "You can be very successful ... teaching out of your backyard and impact hundreds of kids in your small program," he says. "You could make 70 percent of the money with 90 percent less of the headaches on a smaller program."

Hubbard himself says he had to grow gradually and only did so with help from outside sources. "If it wasn't for our affiliation with the people at the U.S. Swim School Association, we would be nowhere," he says. He currently is the vice-president/president-elect of the group. "They opened us up to a whole new world of opportunity."

Perfecting the stroke and more

Today, Hubbard's school demonstrates where those opportunities can lead. From the lobby of the 11,000-square-foot swim school, observers can watch children milling about in the water through the fish bowl-style windows. With its colorful animal shapes, the well-lit natatorium offers a fun environment for kids. And parents often linger to watch them kick across the pool.

The lessons, ranging in cost from \$112 to \$260, are broken up into three sessions a year. They run from Labor Day to Christmas, New Year's Day to Memorial Day, and then a summer session in June, July and August.



LARGE AND SMALL Kids are the focus of the Hubbard Family Swim School, but adults are in charge when it comes to the many different swimming lessons available. Hubbard requires everyone on staff to teach at least once a week.

The Hubbard school offers a range of programs. One introduces parents and babies to water safety and water skills, including back floats, submersions, rollover breathing and water play. The school also offers three levels of swim lessons for children 30 to 36 months of age. These introduce children to the water, teach breathing and basic skills, and emphasize coordination and strength. Only two students are permitted in each of these classes.

For swimmers 3 years and up, the same skills are taught with four students per instructor to solidify their freestyle and backstroke skills. Finally, another class for children 6 and up, focuses on endurance and perfecting the four competitive strokes — front crawl, backstroke, breaststroke and butterfly. These students are divided by ability and by instructor recommendation.

The swim school also has a summer competitive team. But Hubbard says the school is more of a starting point for future competitors. “We have kids who come out of our program who we hope have the fundamental skills and understanding of all four strokes,” Hubbard says. Most other schools emphasize only two, he says.

To maintain these high standards, Hubbard relies on his staff of about 60 instructors, including 12 full-time. Staff runs the gamut, from high school and college students to mothers who operate by their children’s school schedule. Part-timers work between 12 to 20 hours a week.

But no matter who they are or what their position, Hubbard stresses one philosophy to his staff: everyone is required to teach every week. “It helps us keep in touch with what’s going on in the water

and with the kids themselves,” he says.

Still, becoming a teacher takes some doing. Before instructors are allowed to teach children, they must complete 30 hours of in-water training, followed by four to six hours of classroom instruction. During teaching sessions, a supervisor stands on deck to monitor and mentor instructors, while challenging students.

Experienced instructors are paired with beginning teachers who co-teach the classes. In a class with three students, for example, the lead teacher may take two students and the training instructor takes the third.

Classes are taught in two 90-degree swimming pools. One is 15 by 25 feet, 4 feet deep, while the other is 30 by 60 feet. The smaller pool is geared toward the baby classes where the water is a little calmer.

Diving in

Hubbard's own childhood swimming experience lies far from this indoor sanctuary. A New York City kid, Hubbard spent his summers as a lifeguard and swim instructor along the Atlantic Ocean. His wife, Kathy, was an Olympic contender in 1968 and the only woman in the swimming program at Xavier University in Cincinnati, where they met. Hubbard went on to law school at the University of Cincinnati and

became a corporate attorney for several years. Then in 1992, the water called again. The Phoenix Swim Club, a nonprofit organization, was trying to dig itself out of a financial trench and appealed to Hubbard for assistance. As operations director, he helped enhance the foundation and build the competitive side of the swim club with traditional classes. With the assistance of the U.S. Swim School Association, Hubbard was suddenly shown a whole new arena

of swimming and saw a new career unfold. "We saw this as an opportunity to try to do something on our own," he says.

Hubbard began to capitalize on that opportunity in the winter of 1998, when he and his wife acquired the site for their swim school. To raise money for its construction, the two taught lessons out of rented swimming pools for two summers. Hubbard Family Swim School opened its doors in the fall of 1999.

and they have an understanding of what we're trying to do in the water," Hubbard says.

Private vs. public

With so many competing programs — from the Red Cross to summer camps to municipal offerings — Hubbard knows he's not the only game in town. But he says the differences between his school and those programs are the luxury of smaller group

classes and more attention to details. "The Red Cross in town taught 45,000 lessons last year. We can't compete with that," he says. However, his school does stay open year round, and it offers a summer sports camp as well.

While Hubbard maintains one location, he is considering opening a second for families who can't drive across town to attend his school. But in the meantime, he just encourages kids to get into the

water, no matter if it's at his school or at the city pool.

"Our goal is to make kids love the water and be exposed to the water," he says. "If they don't like it, and if we don't meet their expectations, we give them a refund."

But very few refunds have actually been put through, if any. Families continue to return year after year, and the Hubbard's extended family just keeps growing. **AI**

Learning from mistakes

But that was just the beginning. Hubbard quickly learned that building a swim school was like any other business, with lots of trial-and-error. The biggest challenge was mastering the management end of things. "We were really focused on teaching, but I don't think we fully comprehended the administrative side of the business," he says.

Hubbard soon realized that administration went beyond maintaining student rosters. It also involved communicating with parents, booking lessons, checking in and

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renewing students, advertising and preparing brochures. With those aspects of the business in hand, customer service then became a re-sharpened focus — and is now a hallmark of the Hubbard school.

"We do an awesome job, but it's the hardest part of what we do," he says.

Reassuring parents of the child's progress, for instance, is one challenge. If parents don't think their child is gaining enough from the class, Hubbard's staff works to explain how the child is in fact improving with each lesson. In essence, two clients are involved: the student and the parent.

"We try to have an open book with both our staff and parents about what's going on,

Taking Lessons

While municipalities can't compete directly with swim schools, they can learn a few things about running successful programs from them. Here's a look at some of those lessons:

- Try not to schedule too many activities at once in the pool. "A multi-use pool compromises the best educational atmosphere for children," says John Kolbisen, owner of La Petite Baleen schools in the San Francisco Bay Area.
- Identify your core business and market towards them, says Alison Osinski, president of Aquatic Consulting Services in San Diego. A lot of municipalities try to cater to too many people, which is why they lose money. Focus on one or two areas that seem to be the most popular.
- Build more than one pool and design them to be specific for an activity. "It's like building different fields for softball or football," Osinski says. "You can play softball on a football field, but it wouldn't be ideal." Similarly, a competitive pool and a swim lesson pool differ in length, water temperature and depth. Two smaller pools that are more specifically designed works better than trying to make everyone happy in one large pool.
- Maximize space. Divide eight lanes into 16 separate swim lessons. This allows for smaller classes and more individual attention.
- Emphasize swimming as a lifestyle. "You're not done swimming after you get your beginner's card," Osinski says. Community pools often make the mistake of treating swim lessons as a two-week summer activity.
- Make participants feel like part of a team, even if they're just learning to swim. Some swim schools have matching swim-suits and caps. By creating a communal feeling, people will be drawn to return year after year.