

# Mount Vernon CrossFit: Building muscle with technology



For those of us who grew up in what Sean Dunston calls the “Nautilus era” of fitness, a [CrossFit](#) gym—or “box,” in CrossFit parlance—can seem a little disorienting. The usual rows of white and chrome machines that are the hallmark of a traditional fitness center are nowhere to be seen; in their place are dumbbells, kettle bells, ropes, pull-up bars, and squat racks. Dunston is the owner and head trainer of [Mount Vernon CrossFit](#), a “box” located just outside Alexandria, Virginia. While the CrossFit movement might seem retro in its back-to-basics approach to fitness, it owes much of its rapidly growing popularity to technology. Not the kind found on the gym floor, but on the Web.

## **Virtual communities**

“You have to have a Web presence to be a CrossFit gym,” Dunston says. “Regardless of the workouts, your space, or anything else. It’s being on the Web that makes you officially CrossFit.” In fact, all CrossFit franchises are built around virtual communities. At the corporate level, CrossFit allows its local affiliates plenty of discretion with almost all aspects of setting up their businesses, but it has very specific criteria for creating a Web presence. These specifications include practices familiar to online marketing departments everywhere: frequent updates via email and social media, documenting

milestones, and posting photos and videos to make stars of your most engaged members.

This emphasis on the Web isn't just about marketing, however. The Web also allows members remote access to the Workout of the Day (WOD)—a tough, ever-changing series of exercises that is the core of the CrossFit workout. Unlike some CrossFit affiliates that follow corporate's exercise programming, Dunston develops his own WODs, posting them on the [Mount Vernon CrossFit website](#) and [Facebook® page](#) to give members the opportunity to view them and to engage with trainers and each other, regardless of who can or can't make it to the box that day. "I post at least once a day," says Dunston. "Our website is on WordPress and it's very mobile friendly, great for when I'm traveling to competitions and need to post the WOD. I put it up on the site and that feeds into Facebook. It's really simple, and it helps me stay connected."

And the Mount Vernon CrossFit community has come to expect and rely on that connection. "If I'm busy or on the road and the day gets away from me, I'll get people messaging me in the afternoon to ask what's going on, and what's the WOD," Dunston says. "Our Facebook page stays really active. I put photos up and videos. I try to keep it interesting. Oh, and the memes."

Yes, the memes: Xena, Warrior Princess, screaming, "It's deadlift day!" and a Game-of-Thrones-inspired warning that "the 12 days of CrossFit are coming." These are not the national or regional marketing messages that you might see in other, more traditional franchise models. These are organic, bottom-up creations, specific to the local community that spawned them.

### **Creating a subculture**

This individuality is intrinsic to CrossFit, where no two gyms are the same—in architecture or attitude. In Dunston's case, he operates Mount Vernon CrossFit out of a 3,000-square-foot facility that was a former auto body shop, and the gym's aesthetic is understated and low key—metal garage doors that remain open in all but the coldest weather, and no AC in the hot, mid-Atlantic summer.

While Dunston has created a space that is unique, the Web ties his business to the rest of the CrossFit world. For example, Dunston's members can enter online competitions where they rank themselves against competitors around the world, share videos and photos (competition videos are especially likely to go viral), and exchange training tips. In this way, technology allows Dunston to create his own community that fits the local market but also taps into the larger cultural movement.

### **Grassroots success**

Corporate CrossFit suggests that the best marketing strategy is for trainers to genuinely focus on, and care about, the progress of their clients, letting word-of-mouth and Web connectivity work their magic. In other words, be good at what you do, and your fans will help you go viral. For Dunston, this strategy has worked well. He says he has only paid for advertising twice—a couple of \$5 Facebook ads—and the rest of his growth has been organic, through social media, search engine optimization (SEO), and word-of-mouth.

“I’ll go on Facebook and post a picture of a client working out or meeting a goal, and tag them,” he says. “Friends will see it in their feed and get interested.” Then they will show up for a free introductory lesson. It’s a point of pride for Dunston that he took no clients with him from his instructor years at previous gyms when he started his own box two years ago. Instead, the organic growth and continuing success of his business is a testament to his personality and passion, his ability to leverage the grassroots social media strength of CrossFit’s business model, and the appeal of the CrossFit culture.