

Our IYNAUS COMMUNITY is full of business owners finding ways to share the practice of Iyengar Yoga with students. Each region and city has its own specific needs. Being creative in approach and open to change is necessary. Here, three voices share their stories and thoughts of running a yoga business and marketing to their communities.

1. Opening During COVID

By Trishka Lemos – Owner of Iyengar Yoga Aspen

On Sept. 29, 2021, Iyengar Yoga Aspen turned ONE!

Opening a studio in the height of the pandemic was met with incredulous eyes. Eyes of doubt will always exist. And, as B.K.S. Iyengar said, “A doubting mind never succeeds.” So, I jumped into this space and created a sanctuary where one can feel the heartbeat of dedication and passion for the teachings of B.K.S. Iyengar. Iyengar Yoga Aspen is an anchor for Iyengar Yoga and its teachings, and I remain unwaveringly committed to showing up for my students.

In some ways, living through this pandemic is similar to our yoga practice. Just as we come to *asana* and are sometimes met with resistance, with a big ‘NO’ from body or mind, we get to choose how we respond. Maybe we touch the *asana* and meet it with a flicker, a touch-and-go, grazing it with softness. Other times maybe we penetrate deep within, connecting to a source inside that springs forth with light, nourishment, and an all-pervasive quietude and stillness. We can always find a way to be near to this practice, to embrace it, even if the outer expression is vastly different from what the idea is in our mind.



My intention is to have Iyengar Yoga Aspen (IYA) be a sanctuary, a place of light, nourishment, quietude, and stillness, a safe and healing space. There are two AirDoctors on site to purify the air in the studio every 10–15 minutes. Windows are open, weather permitting. Hand sanitizer and wipes are readily available. All public classes are hybrid, offered both on Zoom as well as in person. This outer expression may be vastly different from what we previously held in our minds about what yoga classes/studios are like. But we need to ask

ourselves—If we can't find full expression and creativity to meet what we greet in our practice and on the mat, how can we find full expression and creativity in our lives? We must move and bend with the times, with our lives, with what is. We must find a freedom to be, a freedom to act with love, with courage, with caution, with intelligence, with discernment. As the incident rates vacillate in the tourist town of Aspen, so do the requirements of the studio.

IYA is also set up to adjust to individual student needs in the ever-changing environment. All classes are hybrid, so for those who are unable to come to classes on a consistent basis, I provide a monthly membership option. Included in membership are monthly uploads of guided meditations and 'yoga snippets' not taught in public classes. Snippets may look at just one pose, perhaps what to do if one only has 10 minutes and the back is in spasm. Or maybe what to do if you can't sleep. With fires more regularly affecting the quality of the air, one of the uploads offers a sequence to clear the head and clear the lungs from particulates. Each upload is inspired by my students and what is happening around us at any given moment.

In a world that feels for so many like there is no more solid ground to stand on, where the thought of what tomorrow brings is full of fear and out of our control, now more than ever people need a yoga practice. A safe, stable, firm place where one can find refuge, healing, relief, growth, and stability. A place to sow the seeds of our karma garden by showing up for ourselves and dedicating our practice to the service of others. A place to surrender to the ever-changing nature of reality which is uncertain and unpredictable. There is a famous dharma saying, "If you want to see what has brought you to this point, look at your past thoughts and actions. If you want to see your future, look at your present thoughts and actions."

"A doubting mind never succeeds."

2. The Whole Is Greater Than the Sum of Its Parts

By Tom Hess

"We decided that joining our forces instead of competing was the best way to be successful."

I own The Yoga Center of Chico with my business partner who is a vinyasa teacher. Our studio is in a small town of about 100,000 in northern California. We opened our doors in 2013. And it is true, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This has proved to be the case for us.



I had previously been involved in two other yoga studios that couldn't make a go of it. I was not naive to starting a yoga business, nor was my partner. We knew it was not easy, but we believed strongly that, given the right ingredients, it would work.

We talked about starting a studio together for a year or two and came to the conclusion that our “mixed-styles studio” was the only way to succeed in such a small market. Both of us had good reputations as teachers, and we thought we could be successful together.

At first it was just a practice of survival, setting up all the operating elements of a small yoga business. We had to make sure we could make rent before we could worry about what kind of yoga people prefer. The changes we have made (and there have been a lot of them) have all been made with the students and their needs in mind. We hired a couple of highly-regarded, local yoga teachers and were set to open. To our utter amazement we were a success right away. The community was ripe for an alternative to the local gyms.

Over time, all the teachers have found their niches. Upcoming teachers and serious students have been drawn to the depth of the Iyengar practice. I have become somewhat of a mentor to some who want a deeper experience. And, as always, I also serve the retired and slow moving crowd drawn to a gentle Iyengar practice.

My vinyasa partner has a different role. He likes retreats, so he has created a nice little niche marketplace for his yoga retreats. He also teaches yoga at the local college, so we get a lot of exposure to that demographic. And, he draws the serious vinyasa students.

One of our main teachers is what I would call an “inspirational teacher.” She comes from a gym background and has many attractive qualities that draw the young wives/mothers/working women—a very important demographic.

This whole process has given me the opportunity to expose Iyengar Yoga to a larger crowd of people. When they have taken a class or two, they either like it or not, and our business is successful because we give students options. Not all people like the same approach.

The success of our business relies on the cooperation and acceptance of the many ways yoga can be experienced, and I am proud to be the Iyengar part of the business whole.



3. Building Community — Finding and Retaining Students

By Ned Gardiner, Asheville, NC., IYASE Board member

The December IYASE members’ summit focused on finding and retaining students to Iyengar Yoga. Our invited speakers were John Schumacher of Unity Woods Yoga Center, Aretha McKinney Blevins of the Iyengar Center of Nashville at Chestnut Hill, and Greta Kent-Stoll of Iyengar Yoga of Asheville. The discussion did not explore technical details about technology nor slick methods for reaching out to people. Instead, speakers encouraged us all to continue to focus with sincerity on the core values of Iyengar Yoga. When those principles are strong, as John said, “the cosmos will do the right thing.” Students will

naturally gravitate to teachers and studios when Iyengar Yoga's strong values align with the requirements and interests of the students.

John drew attention to shared values within IYNAUS. We have a strong national association, as well as leadership from Pune, India. Iyengar *sadhakas* have a strong sense of being part of something larger and of great value to the nation and the world. The practice puts us in touch with something larger than our selves (lowercase "s"). Teachers spend years training before they step to the front of the room, which is why teachers from other lineages are interested in taking Iyengar Yoga classes. We strive for excellence, and we are at our best when we share joyously and generously. Aretha reminded us to bring joy and enthusiasm to each class. Our core value as business owners and teachers rests within the context of all of these and other principles rooted in B.K.S. Iyengar's teachings.

The IYASE membership spent time at a board meeting last summer listing attributes of our study that we thought might be useful when adding content to flyers or websites. The following unabridged list is divided into four categories (which admittedly have overlapping conceptual boundaries); these represent the unfiltered views of IYASE membership.

Modification of the physical body: safe, fun, practice, movement, power, challenging, revitalizing, immersion, excellence, relevant, surprise yourself!, always new, longevity, posture, balance, precision

Modification of mental state: inspirational, peace, joy, mesmerizing, calm, dynamic, expansive, empowering, illuminating, equanimity, happiness, transcending, adventure, awe, learning, exploration, mind-blowing, pensive, reflective, soothing, empowering

Personal transformation: evolving, life-changing, journey, healing, a way of life, s(S)elf-discovery, healing, all-encompassing, body-mind-spirit, structure, community, illuminating, all-Inclusive, multicultural, welcoming, compassionate, supportive, strong, balance, therapeutic

Instructors/instruction: competent, skillful, knowledgeable, experienced, creative, individualized, always new, creative, comprehensive, passionate, time-tested legacy, rigorous, vigorous, vibrant

If we follow Aretha, John, and Greta's advice, CIYTs will focus on these and other core values to deliver the best possible learning experience. To benefit from what we offer, students themselves must have interest, maturity, and sufficient attention span. None of the speakers view their business as "competing" with anyone else. Rather, they see the unique value of Iyengar Yoga as serving particular people for particular reasons that only those people can determine.

Each speaker thoroughly addressed the theme of "building community." John described the ebb and flow of students to his business over time, which at one time was the largest yoga studio in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area and possibly the largest Iyengar studio in the country. All speakers agreed that word of mouth has always been, and always will be the most reliable way to bring people to class who are most likely to enjoy and return to class. John reminded us not to say negative things about other traditions. *Maitri* is important. A big part of John's community includes other yoga teachers, many of whom are his former students. Many teachers in his yoga community are from other lineages. He has been deliberate about regularly sitting down for a meal with these peers. He pointed out there is a lot of complexity involved in running a business, so communication can help everyone navigate how to bring yoga to their own distinct community of students. Coordinate schedules so that workshops accommodate many studios. Talk about insurance, running websites, and other technical stuff which may not be a primary interest for you as a yoga student and teacher. Post flyers for one another. Camaraderie is valuable!

During the COVID-19 lockdown, Aretha's resolve to serve her local community sharpened. (Read more about Aretha's approach to highlighting community in [this interview](#) on the IYASE blog.) After the lockdown, she re-opened her doors, enforcing health precautions for students to have a safe place to study with a CIYT in-person. She made online learning an option for community members to stay connected and engaged. And she made it a priority to support home practice. She is committed to her teachers, allowing them to set and maintain their own teaching schedules through the years. She has found that the teacher must be able to maintain consistency so students know what to expect, and when to expect it. New students need to learn the value of consistency, so the Chestnut Hill studio always offers new-student packages to encourage regular attendance at the outset of learning about Iyengar Yoga.

For Aretha, focusing on a great class experience is the very best and most important marketing principle to embrace. Building a “brand,” then, is akin to the practice of yoga itself: persistent, long-term, focused, and internally oriented.

Greta has found that CIYT training and teaching processes work well in diverse settings, for example, teaching yoga at a friend’s cycling studio. Iyengar Yoga of Asheville is evolving its community around a culture of practice, typified by offerings of daily open practice, weekly led practice, and weekly philosophy discussions on top of a full *asana* teaching schedule. Greta and her husband/co-owner, Randy Loftis, also host community celebrations (such as Guruji’s birthday), yoga-themed movie nights, and even clothing swaps.

All speakers agreed that social media remains important for broadening awareness of our shared love of Iyengar Yoga. Aretha reminded us that Guruji was a consummate performer and demonstrator of *asana*. She confirmed that social media posts of advanced poses draw positive attention. Read more about constructing social media posts in Greta’s article on [the IYASE blog page](#). Reaching out through anonymous channels might seem intimidating, but is it more intimidating than getting up in front of a room full of students?

Perhaps we are not a group well-suited to slick marketing campaigns, but, as Greta reminded us, we should always remember, it’s valuable to let people know we offer a genuine yoga learning experience. Greta encourages us further, saying, “Don’t assume people won’t like it! Share your passion!”