

SCORE Small Business Success Podcast: Ian Acker, Fit to Recover



The [SCORE Small Business Success Podcast](#) features interviews with people just like you who are starting and growing their dream businesses. Best-selling author and entrepreneur Ramon Ray talks with SCORE clients about their small business endeavors, challenges and lessons learned.

Ian Acker is the owner of Fit to Recover, a nonprofit gym that supports people in recovery through exercise, community service, nutrition and creative expression. Inspired by his recovery in a similar facility, Acker started having his own workouts in a park with a boom box, inviting people in recovery to join him through Facebook.

Today, the business has over 40 classes, work with 7 treatment centers, and has 105 members. The gym works as a stepping stone to recovery and charges only \$1 a day. They only ask that you be 24 hours sober. The money they earn goes only towards taking care of the facility and paying Acker and his employees, and any extra money goes back into the company.

Ramon: Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for joining me for another edition of the SCORE Small Business Success podcast. My name is Ramon Ray, Editor of Smart Hustle Magazine. Today we're talking to Ian Acker. We're gonna talk to him about his business, Fit to Recover. Ian, thanks for coming to the line today and sharing with us about your business.

Ian: Absolutely. Thank you for having me.

Ramon: You're welcome. Ian, tell us, what is Fit to Recover? When did you start it? Why did you start it? Give us a bit of information on what is Fit to Recover?

Ian: Okay. Fit to Recover is a non-profit gym to support people in recovery through exercise, community service, nutrition, and creative expressions. It came to be, I was actually in treatment for the fourth time five years ago and I heard of this place called Pheonex Multisport and they did outdoor activities with people in recovery and my background was, I played soccer in college and always been active and I started training people at the treatment center I was at in return for food. They would cook for me and I would train them and I found that you can really break somebody down and get vulnerable after a workout. I took that little bit of momentum that I had in treatment and I capitalized on my connection with people and I started in the park with four people and a boombox.

Ramon: Were you playing slow jazz music or what were you playing on the boombox? I'm not teasing you.

Ian: I love hip hop music, man. Hip hop is my life and I thought I was going to be a rapper in my using career.

Ramon: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Ian: I actually have a music studio in the gym which is kind of neat but I made a huge purchase at the time. It was a Beats boombox for \$500 and I put a Facebook post out there and I said "Anyone willing to join me in recovery to work out in the park." We got a little bit of traction, you know, four people. Then I stayed consistent with it and I did it next week and there was ten, and then it went back to four, and then I got self doubting and I got scared and then it went to 15 and then 20 and then it turned into something that people were talking about and I offered another class, [inaudible 00:02:34] allowed us hold a run group at their facility, so now I had a run group and a

boot camp in the park.

Then it just kind of took off, man. People started asking how they could be of service and help me and we finally closed on a building. It was a year and half ago and that was a difficult process in itself but-

Ramon: What was difficult about the process? Just the real estate overall in making such a purchase or renting or something else more difficult than normal?

Ian: It's more my background and what I was gonna do.

Ramon: Okay. Got it.

Ian: Yeah. It was "You're in recovery and I don't know if I trust you and X, Y, and Z."

Ramon: How do you feel about that? Do you feel that "I get it. I understand it" or do you feel, you know, "Give somebody a chance?" How did you feel about that when you heard that then or maybe when you hear that now. What goes through your mind? What's your attitude towards that?

Ian: I'm the person that, I trust everyone until you give me a reason not to trust you, so I believe that everyone should be given a chance and not judged on their past. It was frustrating. The irony is we just won Community Impact Award, a national award, and for someone to say that this isn't gonna be good for the community, we kind of said "Look we're gonna operate in a loving manner and we're gonna treat other people how we want to be treated" and instead of making something that's a disaster to the community, we won an award for the impact that we're having on the community.

Ramon: Congratulations. Okay? You closed on your building about a year ago. I think I cut you off somewhere in the story there.

Ian: That's okay. A year and half and now we currently run 40+ classes we have a creative writing class, we have a dance class, we work with 7 different treatment centers. We have 105 members and we're just building each of these pillars with the nutrition, the exercise, the service, and the creative expression. Things are going well, man. It's just consistency and doing it for the right reasons.

Ramon: It sounds to me ... Just to clarify for those of us who are unfamiliar. How do you work? Are you an alternative to recovery centers or are you a supplement meaning you're in recovery and I'm making it up in AA or whatever it might be and you come to your place at night or evening to support and supplement to make sure, as I hear often, that you're not idle. Is that kind of ... Or both? Explain a bit more how you work in conjunction with treatment centers or compete with them.

Ian: Yeah. We're a stepping stone. We can't be someone's full recovery, but we can be a part of it. We can remind people why they're doing what they're doing and it can bring them around people and it can help them connect with people. With treatment centers, we want to show the treatment center that there's another community once they get out so it's importance to be introduced to it so that the fear is taken away and then when they get out we continue to encourage them and introduce them to another community. We're not in competition with anyone. We're just really trying to be a service.

Ramon: Got it. What's the correlation you find also between health and fitness and the gym and recovery. How does that ... Do you find that that is a higher success rate than someone who is in recovery for some addiction, whatever it might be that as their in a program, it's better to be healthy and going through training, getting beat up, doing push ups, and sit ups, jump ropes, and jogging. Does that help with recovery?

Ian: Absolutely. Everyone wants to see data and that's what we're working on. The University of Utah is conducting studies and there is studies out there that say exercise will benefit your recovery in the

long term, but when you look good you feel good and when you exercise ... I mean, it's not about how much or how little or how strong you are, it's about the fact that you're showing up and you're doing something good for your body. When you start to build that self confidence and the self esteem and walk through things that you didn't think you could, you start to feel better.

Ramon: Right. Absolutely. One hundred percent. Share with us about the non-profit. I know that many business owners ... There's a few things maybe you can help answer as I ask you a hundred questions at one time. There are people who are in business making a profit to give back money to shareholders. Not just paying expenses, not paying salary, but to give back money in making profit. That's business. There's been nonprofit, where I think as I understand it, the charter is, at the end of the year or financial cycle, zero money left, quote unquote it's not to turn a profit back.

Then there's social enterprises, those who are in business make a profit but they're still focused like Tom [inaudible 00:07:27] kind of, one good example, the greater good. Can you help our audience understand, A, about your business in particular and guide them on where they may want to see because you may have others listening who might want to give back to the community but we're gonna be like Ramon but I want to make a profit, or those who want to be nonprofits. Help us to navigate that world.

Ian: Our business model is ... We're in a different ... Not a different category but we have pay for service, which a lot of nonprofits don't.

Ramon: Okay.

Ian: We charge for our services. It makes up about 60% of our revenue which is how nonprofits are gonna start working, I think, in the future.

Ramon: Right.

Ian: Because you need to show that you're sustainable.

Ramon: Okay.

Ian: To turn a profit, I pay myself and I have four or five employees that I also pay so I'm getting what I need out of it and I'm getting a salary.

Ramon: Sure. Sure.

Ian: At the end of the day, I can't look at my profit loss statement and say "That's profit and I'm gonna roll that over and I'm gonna take that for myself" but it just goes back into the company.

Ramon: I understand that, of course.

Ian: Yeah. The way I look at it it's just like any other business. I'm paying myself. I'm paying employees and at the end of the day we just don't take the profit to ourselves we just roll it back into the company.

Ramon: Makes sense. Ian, help us understand any lessons that you've found. Growing a business is not easy. Anything that you would share [inaudible 00:09:03] your journey. I like how you started. You really are a definition of hustle. I mean SCORE is full of entrepreneurs who started kind of from ground zero and going up. Any lessons that you can share with the person who, maybe they started their business in a kitchen, not a park. Maybe they started their business in a baby's diaper room, not a park. Tell us about that journey. Anything you've learned along the way, especially if you had to go back and do it again. Anything you'd do different?

Ian: Sure. Consistency. It's all about consistency. The hardest part, and I think the reason people stop

doing what they're doing is because they don't get the results that they want immediately. There were times in the park when I felt like things weren't working and there weren't enough people in class and I just wanted to give up because I was like "I don't have that energy that I used to" but I stayed with it and I continued to show up. Showing up is the hardest part but for some reason I just continued to show up. You have good days and you have bad days and everything in between but I try and look at the big picture of where we were and where we're at now and that kind of fuels the fire.

The biggest thing is just staying consistent and staying on your mission and not getting skewed away because we've had offers to do X, Y, and Z and do different things that weren't part of our mission, but it dilutes and it takes away from the things that you are doing and it's very important to stay on track with really what you believe in, you know?

Ramon: Right. What do you say about growth. Meaning, of course, you have a core mission, Fit to Recover, built into the name but does that mean that you may not grow or evolve or pivot or add new services and it may mean that. Just, for those listening, if they have a doggy daycare does that mean they can't help cats in 10 years? What does that mean for you, consistency and focusing on the mission? How much can you deviate, if at all, according to Ian's playbook of success?

Ian: Sure. There are 23 million people in recovery so we have a pool that we can draw from. The way you expand ... It's only getting worse, unfortunately. The way you expand is you duplicate the model so you franchise. You keep your target market, you just add more locations.

Ramon: Got it. Got it. Or try to grow another way for those who may have a service based business in that location. I guess you have a better website, expand reach, optimize it in some way, but keep growing.

Ian: Work on your marketing, yeah. Everything else of that nature.

Ramon: Got it. Any particular successes that you want to point to, Ian, clearly the success of you growing from a park to a full location and a five-team company is great. Anything that you point to say "Ramon, here's something I'm really proudest of that really helped us take it to the next level maybe or just overall that was great for you?"

Ian: I think it was the combination of hard work and maybe this isn't answering the question, but hard work and the team we established here. I've gotten so lucky with everyone that shows up on a regular basis and the things that they bring to this gym, I couldn't do by myself and that's one of the biggest things that has really taken us to the next level is everyone is really good at what they do and they compliment each other really well and they stick to the mission, so I think that it's important that you have people that you trust, that you care about, that believe in what you're doing around you so you can use five heads instead of one.

Ramon: That is important for sure. I appreciate that. I'm curious, Ian, where do you see your plans for growth? Where do you see Fit to Recover being in 3 years or 5 years or 90 days. What do you see you growing to and what will Fit to Recover be in the next months or years?

Ian: In the next 3 months we want to have 120 people in our membership base. We want to work with 9 treatment centers, so add another 2 onto there and then we want to expand our Food to Recover ideals of trying to get people to eat healthier as well as expand the four pillars that we have. With the Creative Expressions, maybe add a paint night in and keep the creative writing and go into the community and help kids and then with the service projects, maybe add another one or two a month where we go down to the homeless shelter and we serve the homeless, doing clothes drives, really just expanding each one of the four pillars as best that we can

Our short term goals are 120 members and two more treatment centers and long term goals, in three years I hope to have two or three of these places that we can be serving more and more

people in recovery.

Ramon: That's amazing. I'm curious, Ian, the business model, since you do charge meaning ... So I'm Ramon Ray, by God's grace, I'm not in recovery or have an addiction I'm struggling with, at least that you serve. We all have addiction to something, so meaning, could I come in there and come in there as a member and just sign up or is it for those particularly coming from a program? Help us understand a bit also how your business runs in that respect. Meaning, is it just the deals with the recovery centers or can a family walk in off the street and say "Here's our day pass for our family of four." How does that work?

Ian: Absolutely. We keep our memberships low. They're a dollar a day or \$30 a month and we ask that you have 24 hours of sobriety so we have people that aren't in recovery but they support our mission and what they do is they just don't drink 24 hours to coming. I'd say 70% of our population are in recovery but the other 30 just comes because of the vibe and the no judgement and the love in the community and they understand the mission and more than not they have been affected by addiction in one way or another whether it's a family member or it's something personal with them or it's one of their friends. This disease touches everybody. 24 hours of sobriety and an understanding that we are to help people in recovery.

Ramon: Got it. The 24 hour sobriety, I just want to understand that means, that's a pledge, meaning you're saying "Ramon Ray can you just pledge not to drink for 24 hours" just so I understand, is that correct or now? It's like a pledge like contributing that to the community?

Ian: Yes. If you want to come to a Monday class, you can't drink on Sunday.

Ramon: Okay. Got it. Understood. Great. Lets talk about-

Ian: It's all about, don't talk about partying. Don't wear beer shirts. Keep that all away.

Ramon: Okay. That's where the mission comes in strong, meaning at crunch or anywhere else, gym, you know, [inaudible 00:16:14] gym's too and other gyms but yours, the focus is on for those to recover so you do have that component, what you wear, what you say, that is watched out for because we're at a Fit to Recover gym. Is that fair, what I'm hearing?

Ian: Absolutely.

Ramon: Got it. Love it. Let's talk a bit, Ian, about the role of SCORE. SCORE is one of the most amazing organizations in the world, I think, helping small businesses. A free service by our government, supported by our government, at least, that any small business owner can walk in, can go online, attend the online workshop attend the workshops in person and over 300 offices around the country and say "I need help starting a business. I need help growing my business. I need help with marketing." For those that don't know, that's the power of SCORES. SCORE.org and what score does. SCORES helped my business, Ian. What has SCORE meant to you in Fit to Recover in your journey, Ian?

Ian: SCORE has been unbelievable. I mean, the fact that everything you just said is spot on is kind of mind blowing, you know? I had a mentor help me with my business plan, with the direction, with the ideas, with the finances, with organizing my thoughts, like is this valuable or not? This is my experience, I've done this before, this will probably work better, just a coach and the really cool thing about this whole experience with SCORE is I went into the SCORE office and he whispered in my ear "It's 111 days". I said "What do you mean 111 days?" And he said, "That's all [inaudible 00:17:42]" so not only did it help me in a business way but it also showed me that I wasn't alone and that he understood what I was going through.

Ramon: Wow.

Ian: It was really powerful, man, and now I get advice on a weekly basis on the cash flow, on profit loss, on what we should be looking for, trends, I mean all the things that ... I got my degree in business but that doesn't prepare you to start a business from scratch, you know, and he had experience and he could be on the ground with me and just tell me what was going on because I really didn't have a good idea.

Ramon: Yeah. It's a [inaudible 00:18:30] you said that, Ian, because I was talking to a business owner earlier today and she was saying how most of us, again, you've studied quote unquote, I'm putting in the quotes because you admitted you need help too but most of us don't have a business degree. Lets say you're a farmer, a carpenter, a exercise person, I know that's not what you guys call yourself but [inaudible 00:18:50] fitness person, whatever y'all fit looking people call yourselves. You know what I mean. You're an expert in the tactical things of business. I'm a speaker, right?

Ian: Right?

Ramon: Few of us would call ourselves expert in profit and loss statements or marketing or the things needed to run a business so it's so ironic you said that and you have a degree in business so you've studied the academic side of this but I think what SCORE brings, Ian, nothing beats. A mentor.

Ian: Absolutely.

Ramon: Somebody who's a bit older than us. Often, many SCORE counsels are, who's maybe started and ran 2, 3, 4, 5 businesses in their life. Nothing beats that.

Ian: Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely and it's ... The most important thing is they help you solve a problem when it comes because you don't even know half the problems that are gonna come up but then you have someone to bounce off of when it does and then you figure out a way to fix it because problems come up every single day and the academic side ... I wish everyone, if they want to go figure out something on businesses, try and start your own business. That is the greatest way to do any of this stuff. I didn't ... It's no offense to my school but maybe I just couldn't apply it. A profit loss doesn't mean anything to me unless it's my money.

Ramon: Right.

Ian: You know?

Ramon: You're right. You're right. No [inaudible 00:20:15] to your school. You had a good foundation. You studied as some people do but you're right, until your running it, isn't that what all trainees ... I mean, you know, I'm sure Michael Phelps, he could take all the training he wanted, "Here's how you do it in the pool" but until he ran that first race and then he lost or won it's a different story.

Ian: Absolutely.

Ramon: That is for sure, but, Ian, anything I didn't ask you today or you wanted to talk about that we didn't mention today to help ... Again, ladies and gentlemen, this is the SCORE Small Business Success podcast. My name is Ramon Ray, Editor of Smart Hustle Magazine and, Ian, anything you wanted to share today that you didn't get across that I didn't ask you?

Ian: Just that hope people are ambitious and I hope people try things when they think that they shouldn't, or not that they shouldn't but they have that gut feeling that they want to and I think that you follow your dreams and the greatest thing about what's happening now is I have to tell myself, like "At least I did it." You know? Regardless of the outcome or whatever happens at least I tried and that, to me, I think is really refreshing and just a beautiful think and without SCORE we wouldn't be where we're at today and all things [crosstalk 00:21:29] to the organization and everything they do. I grateful for this interview and I'm grateful for my recovery and I'm grateful for the people around me.

Ramon: Absolutely, and, Ian, one more time tell us how people can reach you. I know the name of your business is Fit to Recovery and one more time just tell us how people can reach your website or whatever you like, please.

Ian: It's www.fit2recover.org or you can look us up on Facebook at Fit to Recover. Our calendar and our Instagram is [fit_2_recover](#) and we have our calendar and testimonials and just more information about what we do down here.

Ramon: Awesome. Where are you based at again, Ian?

Ian: Salt Lake City 789 West 1390 South.

Ramon: Great. This has been amazing. Ladies and gentlemen. This has been Ian Acker with Fit to Recover and what do you call it, a special gym for those who are in recovery is that the way to put it?

Ian: Yeah. I'd say a safe place for people in recovery.

Ramon: Great. Safe place for people in recovery. Again, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for listening. My name is Ramon Ray, Editor of Smart Hustle Magazine and you've been listening to another episode of the SCORE Small Business Success podcast.