

Express yourself!

Capturing the de-conditioned market

OVER THE PAST COUPLE OF DECADES the health and fitness industry has become increasingly adept at influencing people to become members of a fitness facility. The majority of these members, however, have been drawn from a relatively small market – those who are ‘already fit’. Depending on which research statistics you read, the ‘already fit’ audience consists of between only nine and 21 per cent of the population, which leaves facility operators with a large, untapped pool (as much as 91 per cent of the population) of potential new membership sales and supporting ancillary revenues.

De-conditioned, yet interested

Health clubs have rarely penetrated this ‘de-conditioned, yet interested’ (or put another way, the over-40s) demographic as they focus predominantly on the 18 to 35 age group. Regardless of the reasons, traditionally owners and operators have failed to create a model that is compelling enough to attract and satisfy the largest market share in our industry, this ‘de-conditioned, yet interested’ audience. This failure has resulted in missed revenue and growth opportunities for numerous club owners and operators. However, in true entrepreneurial spirit, missed opportunities for one person usually results in a gain for someone else. The rise of Curves and other express circuit facilities, and their success in attracting untrained and inexperienced prospects, has generated a huge influx of new memberships. There is a lot to be learnt from the success of these circuit-based facilities. As operators we know that getting in shape should be the reason that people join our clubs, but we have all heard the statement ‘once I get in shape, I’ll join your gym’. This excuse should give rise to two questions; firstly, how have the express circuit clubs managed to reach the de-conditioned market?; and secondly, what do we need to do as owners and operators to appeal to that same market while, crucially, having a unique selling proposition (USP) to distinguish our facilities as the ultimate health and fitness resource for that market?

Time is of the essence

Specialty express circuits have become a phenomenon because they serve as a solution to many of the key concerns of the ‘de-conditioned, yet interested’ market. Of the variables associated with this market, time constraints, negligible results, confusion, lack of social connection and support and intimidating or non-inviting club environments have been cited as the major deterrents to joining



mainstream facilities. So, how have the express circuit facilities overcome these concerns to appeal to this market segment? One common denominator that we all have (regardless of fitness level, age, gender, social economic status and other factors) is time – or rather the lack of it. Express circuit facilities have exploited this denominator to their advantage by marketing their memberships to the time-sensitive. How many times have you heard a prospect discuss their abundance of spare time before declining to join your club? Never.

Something’s better than nothing

The fact that the majority of this market has probably never before set foot on a gym floor means that embarking on a regular workout will almost guarantee some positive results – doing anything is better than doing nothing. And this is an area you can use in your USP to compete with, and separate your facility from, the competition. It is imperative that you appreciate the current fitness level of the market – this is where most facilities and fitness professionals fail. In an attempt to impress a new member or prospect, during the orientation they show them every piece of resistance training and cardio equipment. In reality, all the first-time exerciser needs is a simple push, pull, lower body exercise routine and a few minutes on a cardio machine which will allow them to be in and out of your facility within twenty minutes. Remember that this audience may have gone many years, perhaps since their school days, without any of this ‘exercise stuff’, so showing them a thousand types



of physical activity will just encourage them to say to themselves, 'I've made it this many years without exercising – I'll take my chances and see if I can make another thirty'. Intimidating members of the de-conditioned market simply makes it easier for them to say no to exercise.

The personal connection

One of the reasons that WeightWatchers became so successful was its technique of leveraging the personal connection of regular meetings. By offering specific times and instructor-led express circuits, you can capitalise on the emotional need for greater exercise compliance and increase ancillary sales. Most express circuits are either single, stand-alone businesses or separate rooms in clubs secluded from the 'weight room'. These circuits can be set up in a space as small as 80 square metres, where the de-conditioned, inexperienced exerciser can feel more comfortable working out without feeling as if they are being critically judged by fitter members. With an understanding of why express circuits are so appealing, club operators can learn from their successes and profit from this market as well.

Differentiate by enhancing one aspect

The big question is; how do you differentiate your facility from the other express circuits out there? The answer is, by understanding what has made express circuits successful and then duplicating their environment while enhancing at least one aspect in order to take your facility's circuit one notch higher. Once you are able to raise the bar on one of those variables, you need to let your audience know the difference and how that difference benefits the end user. The simplest way to create a superior express circuit is by providing a tangible difference that members can feel each time they work out in a circuit environment.

Think different: different equipment, different environment, versatile programs and interactive instructors. Make your facility distinct by using products that are different and by creating a fundamental move away from traditional environments and circuit styles. Focus on equipment and systems that bring immediate results but which are simple

and user friendly with a flexible routine. As the express circuit owner/operator, you need to consider the needs of the de-conditioned market before making any decisions regarding the equipment you provide. Keep the need for the quickest, most effective workout in the front of your mind at all times. Your members need to achieve a more complete workout by activating more muscle fibres within a full range of motion over a multiple set routine. In addition to providing a more effective workout, this will also offer the greater psychological variety that eliminates new member boredom. Your members need to get in and out quickly, while attaining effective results. Considering the fact that the majority of members' goals are body shaping and weight management, you need a system that follows the science of muscle recruitment. The only place body fat is metabolised for fuel is in the muscle cell in the presence of oxygen; therefore recruitment is the goal and innovative equipment and routines in comfortable environments with dedicated trainers the key.

In addition to the 'hardware' itself, some equipment suppliers also provide training, marketing resources and equipment-training for staff and members. There is always a risk that your de-conditioned target audience will perceive attendance of your facility as a life-sentence. You need, therefore, to offer a time-effective solution that will make them believe in the achievability of their health and fitness aspirations. In so doing, your facility will develop a community reputation for attracting, servicing and retaining this de-conditioned yet interested market. ■



David Norman, BPhEd

With 12 years in the sports, health and fitness industries, David has a background in personal training, corporate wellness and health club management and has owned two award-winning express clubs. He now helps more people become active through commercial selling of Strive and interactive fitness products for adults and children. For more information, call 1800 771 079, e-mail dnorman@123strive.com or visit www.123strive.com