



THE MAGAZINE WITH IDEAS & SOLUTIONS FOR RECREATION, SPORTS & FITNESS FACILITIES MANAGERS

Shaping Up

Staying on Top of Fitness Trends

By Dawn Klingensmith

Do you remember those side boards, or "lateral exercisers," designed to work the same muscles as inline skating? No? You're not alone. As far as fitness trends go, they were a flash in the pan. Or perhaps you do recall them—because your fitness facility invested in the equipment and now all those slide boards and slippery booties are stacked up in a storage room, gathering dust. I don't mean to suggest that slide boards were a bad idea or that they are altogether obsolete. They are still being made and sold, and I can personally attest that they provide a killer inner and outer thigh workout. But group slide-board classes simply aren't a programming staple these days. *That's OK.* At certain fitness centers, in order to attract and satisfy customers, the latest trendy workouts and equipment must be offered alongside traditional, tried-and-true programming even if a facility manager suspects a trend won't last—provided it is safe and fields a return on investment.

However, few centers can afford to jump on every fitness bandwagon, and it is in every fitness center's best interest to accurately predict which emerging exercise programs and equipment have staying power.

With short- and long-term planning in mind, the American Council on Exercise (ACE), San Diego, Calif., annually surveys its worldwide network of wellness experts to compile a list of the coming year's top 10 fitness trends. ACE's latest survey, along with Recreation Management's own interviews with several industry experts, found there's a paradox in fitness trends anticipated for 2009 and beyond: Technology-based fitness methods are exploding, but at the same time, a "back to basics" approach involving simple movements, such as calisthenics, and minimal equipment also has a huge following. In addition to the diametrical trends toward technology-based or back-to-basics workouts, an emerging philosophy equating exercise with medicine is gaining traction. At certain types of fitness centers, this philosophy has reshaped the way classes are formatted and taught, and how members are recruited, retained and measured in terms of goal achievement.

Spotting the Next Big Thing

In summary, ACE's survey found that boot-camp-style workouts, which ranked as the No. 1 workout in 2008, will remain a top fitness trend throughout 2009. Additionally, the wimpy economy will force consumers to spend less on staying fit—and since boot-camp workouts are considerably cheaper than one-on-one personal training, they might top the list in 2010, as well.

"The overarching theme for fitness in 2009 is getting more bang for the buck," ACE's Chief Science Officer Cedric X. Bryant said in a written statement. "Consumers will engage in workouts that provide multiple benefits due to time and economic limitations."

Expect to see innovative, out-of-the-box programming and a sharper focus on fitness for the over-50 demographic, as well, Bryant added.

We'll revisit specific trends later. First, let's ask some industry trend-spotters how to tell whether an emerging exercise program or piece of equipment is going to be the next big thing—or the next big flop.

Mike Willis, fitness director of Lindenhurst Health & Fitness Club, a hospital-affiliated facility in Lake Forest, Ill., stays ahead of the curve by sending staff to conferences, workshops and trade shows. "We also tour (equipment manufacturing plants) to see prototypes intended for the marketplace," he said. "We visit other

Chicago-area clubs, too."

When it comes to implementing the latest trends, it's all about quickness and agility, Willis said. Don't be afraid to go out on a limb. However, if that limb does not bear fruit in the form of increased participation and revenues, act fast to prune it.

"Clubs often wait too long to stop providing services not in demand and are slow to begin using trends," Willis said, adding that his four criteria for assessing a trend's potential are whether it has a defined purpose and is safe, effective and fun.

Leveraging a trend effectively involves recognizing when to discontinue the program if the trend slows or members stop using it.

"If boot camp or Zumba (a cardio class based on Latin dance moves) were to become unpopular, we'd swiftly replace the class with something more appealing," Willis said. "Member surveys, comment cards and participation levels tell us what is popular."

Though quick to adopt trends that show promise, Willis deliberates longer when implementation would cost a lot up front. For example, "When we talk about large capital equipment purchases, it is important that we see the piece as a trend with staying power," he said.

Having made that assessment, but faced with budget constraints, "Community recreation centers and smaller facilities could get away with buying fewer pieces of equipment and sharing it in a group fitness class—they would just need to design a workout that is more circuit-like to take turns on the equipment that is available," suggested Marc Santa Maria, a regional director of group fitness for Crunch. He and the fitness chain are based in New York City.

As far as cardiovascular machines go, "Not much changed since the elliptical was added," Willis said. Treadmills, upright and recumbent bikes, elliptical machines, stair steppers and rowing machines are the mainstays. But with the addition of technological and ergonomic features, cardio equipment is evolving, he added.

That brings us to one of three overarching trends for 2009—the marriage of fitness and technology.

Fitness Goes High-Tech

Even the most basic fitness tools, such as workout videos intended for in-home use, reflect the technological advancements of the digital age. Exercise DVDs are broken down into segments, or chapters, so users can choose from a menu of preprogrammed routines; program their own sequence of exercises; or set the chapters on random mode to create a unique workout every time.

New, computer-based programs can transform cell phones and MP3 players into sophisticated fitness monitors that measure and record weight-loss and overall-wellness metrics such as heart rate and calorie expenditure.

But the biggest revolution in home-based fitness is "exergaming," or combining the interactivity of videogames with exercise. Enjoyed as much by adults as kids and teens, the Nintendo Wii system offers sports and fitness programs such as boxing, which allows individuals to square off against a virtual opponent and execute actual boxing moves from a standing position. This new generation of videogames has been lauded as a clever means of getting kids to exercise—which is critical, given the prevalence of childhood obesity—but one possible downside is that "There's nobody checking your form and correcting poor posture, so injuries are likely for the inexperienced," said personal trainer Ariane Hundt of New York.

Thrills on Wheels

Plugging into the digital age, commercial-grade cardiovascular equipment has evolved to include interactivity and dynamic virtual environments similar to those found in videogames.

For example, one manufacturer of upright and recumbent bicycles uses sophisticated computer software and widescreen LCD monitors to simulate outdoor environments, such as woodsy trails or professional racing tours. Riders can race against their own best personal time using a "ghost rider" feature; ride alongside a pacer; or compete in real time against virtual competitors or members using other machines in the same facility.

Over time, riders can track their mileage and other measures of progress on the Internet and see where they rank on global and facility-based boards.

The software-based programs are automatically and continuously refreshed to keep riders coming back for more.

For those who aren't necessarily interested in pretending they're Lance Armstrong at the Tour de France, the screens are configured for television reception, as well.

Hydraulic bikes are another indoor cycling trend. One model has an articulated frame enabling it to tilt, turn and bank like a real bicycle, working core muscles and improving balance in ways that are unique among stationary bikes.

As a final tribute to verisimilitude, some of these new high-tech stationary cycles allow riders to "clip in" to the pedals just as they would on a road or mountain bike.

Turning indoor cycling upside down, the man behind the Spinning phenomenon has come out with a new cardio concept called Kranking, which uses a stationary hand cycle and focuses on upper-body development.

Shake It Up, Baby

Willis of Lindenhurst Health & Fitness Club said he thinks Kranking is here to stay. Other group formats he thinks will endure are dance-based classes, particularly Zumba, a trademarked cardio workout set to Latin rhythms; circuit training and boot camps; and water-aerobics classes geared to all ages.

"The trend today in the water world is taking land group class formats and applying them to the water, such as H2O Yoga and Aquatic Boot Camp," he said.

Mixed martial arts classes also remain popular.

Then there are classes that take fitness innovation to new heights—and in the case of one fad, that's the literal truth. Hundt predicts that AntiGravity Yoga, currently the rage in New York, Los Angeles and Miami, will soon catch on from coast to coast. Advanced inverted poses are performed in hammocks suspended from the ceiling, which is said to allow for deeper stretching and increased flexibility while creating a flying sensation.

However, "I have my doubts that this trend will last," she said, "but it's a rather stylish new way to deepen your yoga practice."

Crunch offers AntiGravity Yoga in its clubs in three—soon to be four—major metropolitan areas. If Hundt is correct and the trend dies down, according to the Crunch model of doing business, it will have been worth it to introduce an exciting and unique fitness technique to its membership. The Crunch philosophy holds that just because trends come and go (that's their nature by definition) doesn't mean clubs shouldn't leverage them while they last.

"It is very important to freshen group exercise classes, especially making them more exciting, interesting or off-the-wall, because one of the most common complaints or challenges in a person being consistent in their workouts long-term is that they get bored," said Crunch's Santa Maria.

Not only does an ever-changing mix of unusual classes stave off boredom, but it also helps people meet their fitness goals and rise above plateaus. Once the body adapts to a particular exercise routine, the results begin to diminish. Changing things up challenges the cardiovascular and muscular systems in new ways, ensuring continued results, Santa Maria said.

The model works for Crunch because the club knows its clientele, but it's not one-size-fits-all.

"Crunch definitely caters to younger, experienced, already-fit people," said fitness facility consultant Sandy Coffman, president, Programming for Profit, Bradenton, Fla. "Its success is to be applauded, but I believe there is a larger, more realistic world that may need to take another approach."

Even among people who work out regularly, the percentage who are always on the lookout for the latest fitness craze is small, said Lloyd Gainsboro, vice president and director of business development, Dedham Health & Athletic Complex, Dedham, Mass.

Just What the Doctor Ordered

For his part, Gainsboro is more interested in the needs of the overweight and obese, whose discomfort in traditional gym settings needs to be addressed.

There's a small but growing movement afoot that defines exercise as both preventive and curative medicine, which is the second of three overarching trends addressed in this article.

"Exercise is medicine if taken in the proper doses," Gainsboro said, adding that it mitigates and in some cases reverses health problems that can lead to serious illnesses.

"I'm not going to be the guy who'll tell you about the next L.A. trend in fitness," Gainsboro said. "Sixty percent of the population is overweight. Sixty-six million adults 40 and older have elevated blood sugar. Where I see our industry trying to get to is using tried-and-true exercises to help those people get healthier."

Lindenhurst Health & Fitness Club in Lake Forest, Ill., also subscribes to the "medical fitness" concept, Willis said, and it's been good for business. Due in part to its ability to engage people who aren't your usual fitness buffs, the club saw a 10 percent growth in membership in 2008, even as one of the giant "brand name" fitness chains filed for its second bankruptcy.

If you need further proof that putting programs in place for the "unfit" could prove to be profitable, Gainsboro points to the fact that Harvard Medical School now offers a course on how to write a personalized prescription for exercise.

"There are a number of us really working toward this," he said. "We're like drug salesmen, except we sell exercise."

A key challenge is making people who aren't accustomed to exercise, let alone fitness facilities, feel comfortable and secure. This likely entails placing them in a separate area so they can privately master basic strength-training and cardiovascular exercises and equipment before moving into the mainstream.

The model Dedham Health & Athletic Complex has found successful is called 60/60, which is 60 days of fitness training for \$60, for folks referred by physicians.

"We set realistic goals and see what happens at the end of 60 days," Gainsboro said.

Then, participants have the option of becoming a dues-paying member.

"Outcomes in certain cases will be astounding," Gainsboro said. "We've had people who start the program on five medications, and in the end, they only have to be on one."

This past year, out of 1,000 medical referrals, 650 signed up for 60/60. Upon completion, 45 percent of the participants became members, Gainsboro said. (Of the remaining 55 percent, about half reported they were joining other facilities, and half were dropouts.)

Fitness After 50

The "medical fitness" model also must address the needs of an aging population. As a whole, baby boomers tend to be fairly robust and don't necessarily want or need special programming. In fact, many are put off by programs geared specifically to "seniors."

However, there is also a growing population of frail elders whose quality of life can be drastically enhanced through exercise. "Making fitness fun is the key to success with this market," Coffman said. "Research is telling us that depression, fear, anxiety, loneliness, inexperience and apprehension is rampant with this population."

Therefore, she added, the few ingredients necessary to ensure success with them are fun, energetic, enthusiastic and empathetic instructors; socialization and laughter; non-threatening, familiar props that can be used innovatively and effectively, such as paper plates, ribbons, balloons and balls of all sizes; and music that relates to them, preferably with fun lyrics.

"The most productive way of beginning these kinds of classes is to offer free one-time introductory sessions," Coffman said. "If the introductory session is fun, the participants will commit to a six- or eight-week program."

ACE's Top 10 Fitness Trends for 2009

- 1. Boot camp-style workouts.** Provide a total-body workout that's varied and challenging.
- 2. Budget-friendly workouts.** In today's wimpy economy, people need to cut costs associated with staying in shape. Forty-eight percent of survey respondents said gym memberships will decrease in 2009 as people start using the natural resources around them and low-cost home equipment to keep fit.
- 3. Dance-based classes, such as Zumba (inspired by Latin dance), ballroom and Broadway.** TV shows like *Dancing with the Stars* and *So You Think You Can Dance* likely are driving this trend.
- 4. Back to basics.** Simple movements and techniques are proven to be effective. Plus, the industry is evolving in its efforts to attract and embrace an increasingly overweight population for whom basic moves are key to becoming comfortable in a gym-like setting.
- 5. Circuit training.** Studies show that interval training combining strength training with cardiovascular activities at different intensities provides a more time-efficient workout.
- 6. Kettlebells.** Achieve whole-body conditioning because lifting and controlling a kettlebell forces multiple, major muscle groups, including the core, to contract as a group, simultaneously developing strength and agility.
- 7. Boomer fitness.** This demographic makes up a sizeable segment of the population and, in all aspects of life, tend to defy the aging process. Baby boomers have the means, motivation and ability to enhance their quality of life through physical activity, and fitness clubs are capitalizing on that.
- 8. Technology-based fitness.** The popularity of videogames, and the increasingly large demographic that plays them, has given rise to "exergaming," or exercise with a computer-based "virtual" component. Expect to see more interactive videogames that provide fitness benefits, as well as new inventions to make exercising a more engaging experience.
- 9. Event- or sport-specific exercise.** In addition to taking part in league sports, individual sports such as cycling and recreational activities, increasing numbers of people are challenging themselves further by training for marathons, triathlons and other endurance events formerly thought of as "elite." Fitness clubs can capitalize on this trend by designing group training programs geared to a specific event.
- 10. Mixing it up.** Programming is changing from a "linear" to an "undulating" progression—for example, combining low-intensity cardio with intervals on some days, and mixing high-volume, low-intensity weight training with low-volume, high-intensity training on alternate days.

Back to Basics

The quest to make fitness fun drives product development. The current generation of whiz-bang gear includes a low-tech but cleverly engineered group-exercise device that simulates the instability of a snowboard and a modern-day version of a pogo stick.

However, due to the back-to-basics movement—the third overarching trend discussed in this article—you might just as likely see sandbags and old tractor tires being put to use in fitness centers, particularly in boot-camp formats.

Boot-camp-style workouts topped ACE's list of fitness trends in 2008, and given their continued allure, along with the dismal economy, their popularity might persist for quite some time.

"People want to work with a trainer because trainers have specialized education in many aspects of fitness, but many people can't afford one-on-one," said Ervin Zubic, vice president of personal training for Lifestyle Family Fitness, which is based in St. Petersburg, Fla., and has clubs throughout the Southeast, Midwest and Mid-Atlantic.

Because boot camps typically are conducted in small-group settings, participants still get special, individualized attention. "Plus, it's fun because like-minded participants form relationships to keep one another committed,

and they get plugged in socially," Zubic said. "It's always more fun to share the pain."

The "accountability factor" is one reason boot-camp workouts tend to be effective, said Zubic: "You have a group of folks relying on you for drills so you're more likely to stay committed."

And there's no doubt that boot-camp workouts get the job done. In October 2008, ACE announced findings conducted at the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse, that a typical workout burns up to 600 calories per hour, which puts boot-camp training on par with traditional aerobic activities such as group cycling and cardio-kickboxing.

"In addition to a great cardiovascular workout, you are also getting the muscular fitness benefit from exercises such as pushups, squats and lunges that you wouldn't get from typical aerobic exercise," Bryant—ACE's chief science officer—said in a written statement.

Tightening Belts and Purse Strings

Mark Federico, president of Massachusetts-based Boost Fitness, said the switch from one-on-one to small, semi-private group training is one of biggest trends he's seen in the past six months, probably because of the savings it provides.

"Semi-private training consists of groups of two to four people working out under the supervision of a certified personal trainer," he said. "The sessions are normally about 50 minutes long and consist of strength training, cardiovascular exercises, balance and coordination, as well as agility and speed-training exercises."

Moving beyond the bare-bones boot-camp concept, these types of groups sometimes target specific niches (such as brides-to-be) or center on a particular theme (such as a "Biggest Loser" type of competition).

"Historically, even with a successful personal training program, we would only be able to see about a 3 percent to 5 percent penetration into our client membership base. With semi-private group training, we are now able to work with about 15 percent to 20 percent of our members on a regular basis," Federico said. "We expect that number to increase in 2009, with a goal of about 30 percent."

Because people who switch from one-on-one to semi-private report they enjoy the experience more, "all of this has led to a higher retention and success rate among our members," he added.

Getting back to basics is not a bad idea provided you don't strip away the fun, as well. Likewise, "medical fitness" shouldn't feel like taking a dose of castor oil, and high-tech fitness should not be so complicated that participants get easily frustrated and give up.

"People need to play," Coffman insisted. "It's the trend of the future."