



Is Your Club Ready For The Next Wave?

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Any parent of a teenager or adolescent knows that his or her most significant challenge in increasing a child's physical activity is technology. As I write this column, my 12-year-old daughter is locked away in her room (having talked her way out of swim-team practice), mesmerized by talking with her friends on IM and MySpace.com, which has more than 100 million profiles with 230,000 new members signing up every day, according to a Sept. 10 article in *U.S. News and World Report*. This site, as well as Facebook.com, is focused almost completely on teens, college students and young adults. An estimated 80 percent of college students now have a Facebook.com account. These sites are engaging and entertaining, and they are holding young people's interest for hours a day.

This trend of social and entertainment Web sites is no longer a harbinger of what is to come. It is here now. This type of technology has been one of the greatest contributors to the child and teen obesity epidemic in our country. The fact is that it's more fun for most teens and young adults to interact with technology than to take the time to exercise. There have been many attempts at combining technology with exercise, and many more are in the works right now. To date, few have found the key to fusing these two elements in a simple and elegant way that will actually make young adults and teens look forward to (or at least not dread) exercise. Popular personal entertainment devices have shown how entertainment can assist in exercise adherence. However, equipment manufacturers need to build these capabilities into their club-based machines. Design engineers are building far too many products without being in touch with the needs and wants of this burgeoning population of exercisers.


So what can the industry do? The easiest answer is to look at how the Internet Generation (those born in the mid to late 1980s to early 1990s) is using this technology. Some of the top uses are to communicate with peers and meet new friends; listen to new bands, music and other media; and read news stories and articles on meaningful subjects. Teens also shop for products from cars to clothing and watch TV, videos or movies.

However, this population will not ignore exercise forever. At some point, they will look in the mirror, not like what they see or have a health risk pop up that they weren't counting on. At that point, many will engage in exercise, and some may even sign up for health club memberships.

To attract teens and young adults to exercise, we can create products that allow them to download music for free after they've exercised for a certain period of time. Another option is to establish communities around activities and sports that they enjoy such as skateboarding and snowboarding. We can also create friendly competitions between them and their online friends to see who has made the most progress and lost the most inches. Manufacturers can embed and upgrade Web-based entertainment on club exercise equipment so that teens are enticed to come to the gym to view a new music video or see a new movie. This technology can also be used to motivate them for upcoming adventure trips or the snowboarding season. If you make popular games available on your equipment, your teenage members will be able to get their gaming fix even while riding a stationary bike.

It is not a pipe dream to think that forming relationships with gaming and entertainment companies will likely change our industry as we go forward. Some of these discussions are already taking place.

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