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Other Industries Can Help Increase Technology Pace Sep 1, 2006 12:00 PM

Gregory Florez

If you've been paying attention, you know that many of the promises of club-based technologies have not worked well or have been slow coming to market. Some of you have purchased technology products that have not provided the excitement or return on the investment you've hoped for.

While some significant technology improvements and progress have occurred in our industry during the past decade, few truly significant technology breakthroughs have happened on hardline products such as treadmills and bikes. Overall, the breakthrough technology trend has been slower in coming to our industry than it has in other industries.

Before you write a letter to the editor protesting my statement, understand that I am not discounting the advances you've made with vendor partners in our space. Digital screens, integrated systems for cardiovascular equipment and wireless connectivity are all valuable. Many of us remember the first electronic treadmills with their jerky movements, no cushioning technology and little to no feedback. Vendors have made significant progress in these areas.

However, we are in the fitness business not the technology business, and we should stop pretending that we are. Other industries — from aircraft part manufacturers to the soft drink industry — are much further along in understanding consumers and designing technology products around them. For example, many soda vending machines can wirelessly contact headquarters when products need re-stocking, says Tim Hawkins, president of Nautilus Fitness Equipment and a former senior level vice president for Coca-Cola.

In the fitness industry, technology exists that informs club owners about how many hours equipment has been used. The technology projects maintenance needs and instantly communicates with the vendor when a machine goes down. Is it possible for this technology to be honed even further by working with companies that have led these innovations in other industries?

Club owners must push vendors to partner with technology companies that have been successful in other arenas. These partnerships would accelerate the technology learning curve in the fitness equipment space, Hawkins says.

Club owners must decide which manufacturers they will "hitch their wagon to" for the next decade with an eye toward those who are creating partnerships outside of the industry.

Paul Byrne, president of Precor, agrees that the industry can't rely on valuable breakthroughs occurring only in-house.

"No one in our industry is at a loss for great ideas. The limiting factor has been cost," Byrne says.

Volumes of sales are low in this industry compared to other consumer products such as cell phones, so a manufacturer can't develop its own proprietary IT solutions. Research and development, tooling and marketing costs don't provide a necessary return on investment yet, he says.

"We absolutely need to look at consumer products that are selling in other industries to draw a bead on where we concentrate our efforts," Byrne says.

Our industry is making gains — just not as quickly as most of us would like. We need to increase the pace of innovation by going (literally) outside of our traditional box. This will only happen if vendors and club owners work together to discover the technology that club members want and need. Once they do so, they must carve out the time and resources to focus on the end-user experience while remaining open to creating partnerships outside our industry that will make these findings a reality.

Gregory Florez is CEO of FitAdvisor Health Coaching Services and First Fitness Inc., which was rated as the No. 1 health coaching online training service by *The Wall Street Journal*. Gregory can be contacted at gregory@fitadvisor.com.

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