



Stepping Beyond Stale Fitness Technology

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Gregory Florez

The fitness industry tends to become stale and myopic about the future of equipment, trends and tools that can further our businesses. However, thought leaders in every industry have stepped outside of the bubble of their peer's limited thinking to generate products and services that give birth to creative breakthroughs.

Recently, I interviewed Jonathon Puskas, a strategic platform planner for Intel's Digital Health Group. He is committed to changing how consumers interact with their personal computers in the areas of personal care, health and fitness and management of chronic diseases. I've included some of his comments here (for the full interview, go online at http://fitnessbusiness-pro.com/news/syndicate/future_fitness_tech).

Gregory Florez: What macro trends do you see evolving in the next 12 to 18 months that involve technology in the health and fitness arena?

John Puskas: There are essentially two places to "play" in the aging population arena: treatment and prevention. Arguably the most fertile market for the fitness industry is "the worried well" — those between 30 and 45 years old who, although not yet ill, have a family history of diseases and risk factors (or simply want to stay proactive in their health and nutrition). They represent one of the most fertile groups for technology partnerships.

However, all categories of the population are becoming regular users of technology, particularly using their home personal computers. Early adopters, generally athletes, have been using technology that started with the heart rate but now includes devices that measure speed, altitude, power, cadence, all of which are uploadable to their coaches. It is becoming easier to make these devices even more compatible with PCs. This aggregation will lead to more seamless use of pedometers, weight scales, even virtual training modalities for all exercisers. Fitness companies recognize that downloading enhances the viability and efficiency of exercise devices which, therefore, increases adherence and goal achievement.

GF: There appears to be a merging of health care, personal care and fitness. What does this brave new world look like?

JP: We see a definite continuum here. It involves improving quality of life combined with lower health care costs.

We picture a world where you do all of your workouts, record the food you eat and all of it aggregates to the PC. When you go to your health practitioner, you would carry a USB stick that would contain critical information. Essentially, this becomes a space where fitness information is a feeder into a personal health record. Ultimately, you — in partnership with your health care team — can maintain important information electronically and digitally in a wireless world. This information could be aggregated on the Web for your coach or health care professional. Here then is really the vision: Your customer would arrive in a gym (not only your gym but gyms around the world for travelers), type in their password and user code, up would pop their favorite music to listen to, workouts from their coach and any "exertainment" devices that are to be used in their workout, communicating to their heart rate monitor and altering the beat of the music or pace of the workout resistance to keep them in their optimal target heart rate or cool down zone. And this is just the beginning.

GF: Given this discussion, what then would the future gym look like?

JP: To begin with, everything will be wireless. Exercisers will also use an RFID (radio frequency identification) band like those used in marathons. I just arrive in the gym and my workout, my machine preferences and my entertainment are ready to go. Clubs could insert video or audio ads or information. Each machine knows what I did last time and then tells me what I should do this time. And all of this happens in the background with no key strokes or effort from the user. Life is good.

For the gym this information could be used for things such as preventative scheduled maintenance and hours of use. A good infrastructure is in place now at many gyms and their partner manufacturers.

I envision a workout world where you don't just go to a spinning class, but from home you can go to a Web site where a real-time coach can teach a class and do a voice over IP providing instruction from "pick up your pace" to "decrease your heart rate." This is a potentially huge benefit for an already time-starved population. From your club's point of view, you can touch many, many more customers and create greater loyalty, not to mention additional revenue.

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