



Tech Turned Upside Down

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Gregory Florez

Unless you have been asleep at the wheel, you've heard about the partnership between Nike and Apple to create the Nike+. In the context of commercial fitness equipment, the breakthrough product points to a new way of looking at how club products will be designed for the way consumers purchase products now.

The Nike+ uses a foot pod wirelessly connected to an Apple Nano iPod for runners and walkers. The product provides everything from music and real-time video to motivational messaging and logs everything imaginable. Users sync their iPods to a computer, instantly accessing progress reports, downloading music and video, and planning future workouts. This affordable technology is an example of simple, elegant products available to consumers.

Why should you care about this technology? For the same reason that movie theaters are concerned about in-home plasma screen TVs and high-definition home theaters. These products keep more of us at home instead of buying movie tickets.

The commercial fitness equipment industry has generally innovated from the top down. Many technology breakthroughs were introduced first in club equipment and then engineered into home equipment at lower costs. Dozens of products customized for home use from modular home gyms to elliptical trainers feature technology from club-based platforms.

Today, the food chain is being turned upside down because of products like the Nike+, cell phones with real-time TV feeds and other personal entertainment. The next generation of commercial equipment will be driven by devices that people use in other areas of their lives. Exercisers using headsets tethered to a piece of equipment can view TVs at most clubs. Although popular, this entertainment option lags behind mainstream consumer technology.

New consumer technologies are making health clubs look primitive, says Jay Blahnik, a nationally recognized fitness trainer and lead consultant for the Nike+ projects. "Most entertainment currently in clubs is forced on the member according to available in-club technology," he says. "Many club members are now asking why they shouldn't use their iPods to watch on-demand TV, listen to their own playlists and view real-time video without being tied to a facility's limitations."

Manufacturers are exploring different iterations of new technology possibilities, using existing platforms such as the iPod or through partnerships with technology companies.

As Netflix CEO Reed Hasting states, "Increasingly, people will trade fidelity for convenience."

Translation: they would rather have portable personal choices than have the quality of high definition video, etc. Consumers are voting for increased control over customization of their media.

Successful fitness facilities have used trends in demographics to create successful programs. This thinking will drive product innovations that respond to consumer needs. If you question this, walk your fitness floor during prime time. Chances are that more than 30 percent of your members are listening to music on a personal device. For non-club exercisers the numbers are certainly higher. Club owners looking to create services that members and potential members crave must embrace this by partnering with vendors to develop needs-based products.

The critical step as a club owner is to understand and capture your members' entertainment needs, then share this with your vendors. This will drive useful technology enhancements much faster than a manufacturer designing equipment that they believe is leading edge.

Blahnik sums it up best by saying, "My clients are demanding that the technology products they use outside of the club be available to them in my club."

Innovations in personal entertainment are not going away. It's time we catch up.

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