



Unrevolutionary Unveilings

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Gregory Florez

Treadmills, elliptical trainers and bikes continue to saturate the fitness equipment market. When I attended the recent Health and Fitness Business conference and exhibition, I was disappointed with the absence of any truly revolutionary products in the hardlines category. This annual show is typically where equipment manufacturers unveil their next year's product offerings to retail managers, buyers and owners. Most retail owners also bring along their top sales consultants, buyers and managers.

By all accounts, the retail channels for fitness products are healthy again, with attendance up dramatically from the past several years. The conference hall was packed with small companies selling sales and retail management software and the larger platform makers of strength, cardiovascular, yoga and other associated products.

I discovered that nearly every manufacturer of hardline equipment (treadmills and strength) now offers elliptical products, bikes and in some cases, bundled sales programs in each of these categories. I was struck by the number of new companies with floor space selling these products in addition to long-term players. In talking with many of these vendors, I learned that the treadmill market is still very strong (\$2.81 billion in 2004), and ellipticals remain one of the fastest growing equipment categories at \$280 million. Many new companies feel established vendors aren't addressing the consumer-friendly treadmills at a lower price point between \$1,200 and \$2,200.

With technology becoming more affordable, I've noticed that many companies are using key selling features to win the hearts of consumers. These features include on-board flat screen TVs, more customized user programs and controls and much improved display screens that are larger and backlit for aging eyes. There is also a trend toward simplifying the user interfaces on the consoles across all platforms.

Strength equipment is split down the middle. Some manufacturers are offering old school and basic plate-loaded equipment. Others have created highly sophisticated selectorized home gyms that can be customized to accommodate different user sizes and be adjusted to a variety of resistance modes. In many cases these strength machines are being sold on space savings, safety and customizable sizing, padding color choice and exercise options.

I also noticed a small but growing trend in vibrational strength-training equipment. This equipment supposedly helps increase lean muscle and bone density through a process that requires non-traditional exercise.

A majority of strength-training and accessories companies are marketing the core and sport-specific training features of their machines. This includes a combination of new programs such as yoga and strength to traditional programs using medicine balls. This continues to appeal to weekend athletes as well as Baby Boomers looking to improve spinal and abdominal integrity as they age.

The accessory side of the industry is also moving toward total solutions packages that provide strength, flexibility, mobility and even relaxation in bundled offerings. These include everything from packaging with balls, mats and DVDs, to tubing, and portable stability and athletic training devices with customizable programs that are activity specific. This category in particular understands consumers are increasingly more time starved, mobile and want portable equipment that can be used anywhere with elegance and simplicity.

Another trend is the increasing simplicity of both strength and cardiovascular products. For the past decade, companies have raced to provide more programs, more options and more technology for the end user — features for the sake of having features. It appears that many companies are realizing that consumers are overwhelmed by owner's manuals and have little patience to push five buttons to simply get going. Most companies, while still offering programs and customization, have added quick start programs, and easy-to-read pictorial renderings of specific exercises for strength equipment. This is welcome news to an American population that sees exercise as complicated and overwhelming.

Note: Before you start sending me e-mails, understand that there were several new products offered by new and established companies at the show. I will research and test them so I can cover them in a future article. The point is that many of these new products have not proven to be a magnet for exercisers in clubs and in homes — yet.

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