

OUTSIDE THE XBOX

TAKE A CHANCE ON NEW TECHNOLOGY, BUT DON'T STOP AT PLUGGING IT IN! USE INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT PRODUCTS AS A SPRINGBOARD FOR DEVELOPING BIGGER AND BETTER PROGRAMMING, AND TO ADD VALUE TO YOUR MEMBERSHIPS.

By HEATHER PEAVEY, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

INDUSTRY EXPERTS AGREE that retention is highest at facilities that are the hub of their members' physical and social activities. You can accomplish this in many different ways. Midtown Athletic Clubs, Chicago, Ill., added extensive food and beverage services in the form of its upscale M Cafes. On the flip side, Flirty Girls Fitness, Chicago, Ill., lures members back to the facility after hours by hosting party-style events with a boozy, dance club atmosphere, complete with cover charges and DJs. But instead of scouring the country for a French-trained chef or installing a stripper pole by your front desk, why not make the most of the interactive fitness equipment you may already have in your facility?

Common thought leads us to believe that interactive technology and fitness programming are mutually exclusive. A handful of glassy-eyed children pumping away on exercise cycles while staring at a video screen, swallowed into a virtual game world, is what usually comes to mind. But interactive equipment can actually serve as a launching pad to develop programming that helps create a sense of community, build social structure and forge personal relationships.

Use technology to strengthen your mission

Translating gaming technology to fitness has always been considered a way to target a specific market: children. But when it came time to take a closer look at the interactive equipment hitting the market, The South Hampton Roads YMCA, serving coastal Virginia and northeastern North Carolina, wanted to apply available technology in a way that strengthened its commitment to families. "In 2005, we directed our attention to members of all ages at our YMCAs in the quest to increase physical activity and promote wellness in a fun, playful environment, using



the tools that technology provides us with every day: video games, bright lights, virtual reality, music and movement," explains Tom Flynn, executive director. "We designed and created Interactive Zones at each of our 13 YMCA Family Centers, decorated with bright colors and fun logos, furnished with several brands of interactive equipment: Cybex Trainers, SportWalls, Powergrid Kilowatts, CatEye Game Bikes, DDRs and climbing walls."

The Interactive Zones are designed to accommodate members of all ages, including adults and older adults. "Everyone loves to exercise when they can do it in a fun, friendly, game-type environment, when the technology is easy to use, reliable, durable and motivating," says Flynn. "We knew that our efforts to bring the family together at the YMCA would increase significantly with the Interactive Zones and, to date, we continue to enjoy high volume participation from all ages."

Interactive Zones launched in 2006, and has fulfilled its promise as a unique space where kids and adults get active together. "Our Interactive Zones experience overwhelming participation by youth, teens and families," says Flynn. The Interactive Zone's success owes a great deal to the highly trained and focused staff members the Y has assigned to the task. "Our staff team members are genuinely interested in providing fun experiences for our members," he says. "We look for those staff members to invite a 'playful behavior' to everyone. ... You cannot help but feel upbeat when you walk into our YMCAs."

Finding playful, yet professional, staff takes effort. Flynn says training requirements are "intense," and there are several standards the Y holds high: "We hire staff with interpersonal skills and positive attitudes, with a desire to work in an environment with youth, teens and adults." Training consists of new staff orientation, and required courses like Working with Youth & Teens, Membership Service, SPARK training (Sports/P.E./Recreation), safety, CPR

and first aid. Technical proficiency isn't necessarily highest on the Y's list, says Flynn: "We can train the technical aspects, once we have the right people."

"Our Interactive Zones do not operate by themselves, and we do not allow technology to diminish the importance of our human touch," he adds. "The bright lights, virtual reality, fun music and movement all come

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together when our outstanding YMCA staff team provides the interaction with our members. At the end of the day, when our YMCA families go home, they remember the fun that our staff provided them. The bells and whistles are fun too, but our staff team brings them back."

Cater to your community

Ideas for integrating new technology into your facility should stem from the basic makeup of your members and their interests. Consider FitOne Athletic Club, Chico, Calif. The Chico area has a large biking community, thanks to its unique geographical layout. Nestled at the base of foothills leading up to Mt. Lassen, cyclists have access to the best of both worlds — flats for easy rides and stretches of mountain paths for a challenge. "We were once listed as one of America's best bike towns," says Tim Garcia, FitOne fitness director. With so much community interest in outdoor biking, constructing an 800-square-foot virtual group cycling amphitheater might seem like overkill — like the equivalent of televising a baseball game being played in your backyard. But FitOne Chico took a different approach, and designed its amphitheater not to compete with outdoor cycling, but to complement it.

The amphitheater consists of 30 cycles, a 70-inch big screen television, surround sound system, special lighting and a video/DVD player. "The tri-level amphitheater makes it easy for all to view the screen," says Garcia. "The instructors find the right mix of music to match the ride, and the video screen puts the rider on that outdoor route. The instruction, mixed with the music, creates the perfectly realistic ride, with hills, flats and curves. The surround sound adds the extra touch. There could be music, or even the sounds of the outdoors to make the ride even more real."

Garcia says the amphitheater is popular with everyone: "Our classes always fill up, and often members arrive early to reserve a space." But many regulars are also competitive cyclists. "Members use the classes to prepare for racing," Garcia explains. "We also have some who do prep for triathlons." FitOne has embraced the competitive cycling community in an even bigger way. "Our [group cycling] director, Dave Klein, formed a FitOne racing team, and they participate in many rides together." The team's distinctive red uniform unites members in a common interest, and brings them together both inside and outside the fitness center to pursue it.

Ideas are everywhere

If you're confused about how to build programming around interactive equipment, take a look around your own community for inspiration.

For literary lifestyles. Portland, Ore., is home to Powell's Books, the largest independent and used bookstore in the U.S. If your community is known for its literary lifestyle, why not purchase a slew of books on CD for your members? Most audiobooks run between an hour and an hour-and-a-half per CD. It may even keep them at your facility longer than a quick, 20-minute session — after all, who could bear to leave before they reach the end of the chapter?

For world travelers. Connect18 is a new product that combines cultural education with cycling. According to the company's website (www.connect18.com), "the educational material is integrated with physical exercise instruction and taught in the context of a cycling tour. Riders tour regions of the world that are relevant to the subject matter being taught. For example, on a Beginner's Spanish Language tour, cyclists may find themselves cycling through rural Mexican villas while they learn language, culture and history."

Currently it's in place at only one facility: San Francisco Bay Club, Calif. But think of the possibilities at your own fitness center. Does the local school district's French club take a trip to Paris each spring? Offer a special, short-term membership so they can get fit for the trip, get immersed in the language of love, and learn about the land of cheese and wine. Reach out to other travel clubs and senior centers that organize trips abroad or to California's wine country — then treat them all so well, they jump at the chance to join your fitness center when the class ends.

For plugged-in members. There are some areas where people would rather cut off their pinkie toes than relinquish their cell phones or PDAs. Instead of putting up signage banishing handheld electronic devices, why not embrace the technology your members depend on? Require that cell phones are set to vibrate so annoying ringing is kept to a minimum, then take a cue from The Main Street Gym, Bozeman, Mont., which offers its members free Internet access. Your members will appreciate being able to stay connected during their workouts, and may even relax in your beverage bar after their shower to catch up on email. (Make sure you have strict rules about taking photos, however.)

For members in it to win it. The South Hampton Roads YMCA recognizes that the thirst for competition doesn't fade with age. Its Interactive Zones have programs in place to capitalize on the inherent competitive nature of gaming technology, and its users. "Tournaments, competitions, etc., are highlighted all of the time, such as 'DDR Tournaments For Teens,'" says Flynn.



And, what's a competition without reward? "We have linked our Interactive Zone to our FitLinxx system, so our members can log in their activities for points," says Flynn. "We then have incentive prizes when reaching certain levels." Prizes are split into youth prizes (basketballs, key chains, shirts, caps, iPods, etc.) and adult prizes (socks, towels, shirts, caps, sweatshirts). "Mom and Dad love to play with their children as they compete in a fun, safe, wholesome environment," Flynn says.

For the iPod generation. You've invested in a line of cardio equipment that allows users to plug in their iPods and work out to their own beats. What more can you do? Well, try creating your own podcast workouts. Assign a different trainer as the podcast instructor each week, and create workouts designed specifically for that type of cardio equipment. Upload the podcasts to your website and make them available for free download. This



accomplishes a few things: Your members will visit your website frequently; they'll get to know your trainers and their individual styles; and they'll appreciate your efforts to integrate your fitness center's personalized services to new technology.

Beyond bits and bytes

If you don't take the time to create effective programming, interactive equipment can seem like just another way to isolate people in a "plug in and tune out" world. Instead, use your facility's unique makeup of staff and experience to make the most of today's technology, and tomorrow's. **FM**

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