

How to Build Excitement

For fitness facilities, generating interest in your programs is a fine art. Here are some tips program directors can implement immediately to keep members coming back.

By Donna Meyer

Remember the last industry convention you attended? As a health and fitness professional, you undoubtedly returned home inspired and motivated to implement many of the concepts unveiled during the show. At first, you might imagine this excitement emerged from all the convention workshops you frequented. If you think about it, though, the seeds of your enthusiasm were planted months earlier. Maybe you read magazine articles about the event's presenters. Perhaps the convention registration materials prompted your curiosity about new industry trends. If a few of your colleagues talked about attending, their anticipation likely impacted yours.

The inspiration and motivation you felt upon returning home from the convention was created over time. The event planners knew how to build excitement about the show—and so should you. If you want to increase the success of your programs, you must learn how to generate incredible interest. The following 10 tips can point you in the right direction.

Create a Buzz. Creating a buzz about a program is just another way to communicate. Consider it the hot sauce on your favorite food. The greatest asset in building excitement is, of course, you. Most program directors have enough charisma to influence *any* endeavor.

André Houlé, co-owner of In Shape at André's in San Francisco, offers this key strategy when creating a buzz: "When making changes, provide information, information, information." In

other words, get your message out early and often so club members and potential customers can hear about it and comprehend it. "Use your motivation skills to get people fired up," Houlé says.

You do not have to reinvent the wheel either. Borrow a page from an already successful buzz generator. For example, *People* magazine publishes a column called "Style Watch," which covers what's hot in the world of fashion. One

of the columns featured an accessory called Buddha Beads. Within one month, almost every instructor in our club was wearing at least two strands of these trendy bracelets.

Why not create a local "What's Hot" column for your club's newsletter, bulletin board or Web site?

Tease and Tempt. Where I live, Costco Wholesale Corporation does an excellent job of promoting its products. When I shop at the local outlet, I can usually get a full meal just by sampling all the food items offered throughout the store. Inevitably, I end up purchasing products based on the samples.

Use this same strategy for your programs. Offer samples of a new program format to whet members' appetites. Host several small events during peak hours. Target specific audience types. Try new ways to reach out to customers using "teases" and "temptations."

Try Different Approaches. What works for building excitement with one program may not work with another. Different scenarios take different approaches. Sometimes the best approach is not the most direct.

How do businesses continue to keep customers excited about their products? In the fitness industry, it takes time to build enthusiasm for new or refurbished exercise programs. The payoff, though, is worth it.

Linette Barnes, assistant manager of California's Rancho San Clemente Tennis and Fitness Club, listened to members complain about physical and mental stresses related to playing tennis. After assessing the situation, she found an answer: yoga. Barnes' desire to implement a yoga program was based on her belief that the activity could benefit members. Still, she knew that many of them were not ready to move into "that aerobics room" for yoga classes.

So, Barnes cleverly introduced a functional stretching class. Over time, the stretching class evolved into a yoga class. She won over members by listening, educating and slowly introducing solutions to their tennis-related stresses. The evolution happened as members experienced results and felt comfortable in the new environment. It may not have turned out as positive had the instructor posted bright flyers announcing a new yoga class.

Know Thy Audience. Always know what you are selling and how to tailor it toward the right audience. If a class is geared toward corporate professionals, then make sure the message gets communicated in a manner that impresses that demographic. In Scottsdale, Arizona, the Gainey Village Health Club & Spa has built successful programs around this very theory. "We provide exceptional customer service to our members," says Patti Jasinski, Gainey's group fitness director, "and consequently have developed a loyal following."

How do Jasinski and her colleagues do it? One way is to stage special events. When the facility decided to hold a new year's eve cycling get-together, every member received a personal invitation.

Those that signed up for the outing received complimentary hats and noise-makers. They also received free orange juice and champagne at the end of the excursion. The next day, Jasinski sent personal thank-you notes to each participant. That's good customer service!

Carefully Plan Excitement. Never underestimate good planning. Before you launch or refurbish a program, anticipate every nuance and visualize the outcome. Make it an event to remember.

On a recent special occasion, my husband took me to the Ritz-Carlton for a dining extravaganza. Zowie! From the moment we walked into the restaurant until we finished dessert, everything was designed to entertain our senses and appetites. When you introduce or remake a program, create the perfect atmosphere. What your team wears, what music is playing and how you decorate the facility are all equally important. Plan a detailed agenda of how and when things will happen.

Chalene Johnson, national program director for Turbo Kick in Aliso Viejo, California, says her program is a total package that's carefully designed. When the company's instructional videos are produced, for example, all of the dialogue and cues are planned down to the second—even the jokes. "Kickboxing has failed in some markets because the approach was too serious," Johnson explains. "For a program to *create* excitement, it has to be a blast for the students!"

Build a Great Team. To build excitement for your programs externally, you have to build a great team internally to support them. Your instructors can be your greatest asset—or your greatest obstacle. As you plan a new program

or redo an existing one, involve your group exercise instructors at the very beginning. Utilize their talents and ideas.

"I still remember watching that silly barbell class at World Fitness IDEA® three years ago," says Doris Dodge, a regional group exercise director for 24 Hour Fitness, based in Carlsbad, California. Dodge knew nothing about the class, so she felt isolated from the concept. Later, after attending a training program on the idea, she changed her tune about its merits.

To build a great team, you must involve your instructors. Without their support, it will be an up-hill battle.

Market from the Top Down. To generate excitement about your programs, why not cut to the chase and influence those instructors who always seem to be "in the know"? If you can convince even a few trendsetters at your facility to try out a new program, their energy can be used to sway everyone else. In turn, all the instructors will then be "on board" to market the program to their students. With this method, the excitement starts at the top and moves down toward the member.

Consider my theory about the tousled "bed head" look. Had my local hairdresser suggested that I mess up my hair as a fashion statement two years ago, I would have thought she was pulling the ultimate trick on me. Let Meg Ryan wear that same look, however, and I am all over it!

Think about the industry leaders you admire and try to emulate. These successful leaders greatly influence our decisions. The confidence we place in our role models allows us to trust their judgement. You have this same power

programs

when you work in tandem with top instructors. Use them to reach out to your membership base.

Make the Name Count. Brand names generally evoke clear-cut images in our minds. When I hear “Old Navy,” I think of affordable merchandise made trendy. Even veteran shoppers experience “mall rush” when canvassing Old Navy’s merchandise.

If you are trying to build excitement about a program, make certain the class name, format and description entice your market. Then deliver the goods.

Give It Time. Some things, like fine wine, take time to become great. Very few programs are instantly successful. Therefore, keep the excitement growing and be smart about your communication style.

When you first introduce a new fitness program or trend, members usually know very little about it. However, we may have already experienced the hype about a program through our daily discussions with colleagues, reading trade publications and attending industry conventions. Your job is to recreate the same rush for them that you initially felt. Go slow, be patient and remain persistent.

Chat Up the Front Desk Staff. Your facility’s front desk represents the next generation in the fitness market. These staff members may seem young and inexperienced, but they usually know what’s going on. Members tell them *everything*.

Make an effort to develop relationships with these staff members. Tell

them about a new program you’re thinking of starting next month, and ask how they think it will be received. I know one group exercise coordinator who rewards her front desk staff when they go the extra mile. She gives them protein bars, washable tattoos and, as she says, “anything with rhinestones.” Don’t miss out on the greatest communication system in the gym.

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