

If You Build It, They Will Come:

Starting a Pilates Program in Your Facility

By Lindsay Merrithew and Moira Stott-Merrithew

Now that a U.S. District Court has ruled that *Pilates* is a generic term (see February 2001 *IDEA Health & Fitness Source* Industry Watch column for details), more and more fitness facilities are considering providing this popular form of exercise to their members. But before you implement a Pilates program in your facility, you need sufficient information to make an educated decision as to the most suitable approach. In fact, one of the key principles of Pilates—i.e., stabilizing before mobilizing—should be applied when integrating this discipline into your programming lineup. In the same way that Pilates exercises strengthen the body's core, building a strong foundation will ultimately benefit your Pilates program.

This article will help readers determine what's behind the Pilates hype; whether you and your members are ready to make the necessary commitments; the role well-trained instructors play in the success of a Pilates program; your programming and equipment options; and how to market the program and generate revenue.

Understanding the Pilates Pull

At first glance, many program directors and business owners may not even question the need to implement a Pilates program. After all, members and clients are asking for it, the media are promoting it *and* demographic trends and revenue projections support it. If all those reasons are not compelling enough, this fitness format is associated with an impressive list of health benefits, including injury prevention, increased strength and flexibility, and improved balance.

Nonetheless, there are challenges to be reckoned with. Unlike other popular fitness modalities that have more of a singular physical focus, such as group cycling, Pilates is a mind-body discipline that combines core stabilization and peripheral mobility training to enhance the way the body functions. As such, Pilates is relatively complex compared to some of the newer branded exercise formats. For one thing, there are more than 500 different Pilates exercises and variations. And many of these exercises can be performed both on a mat and on specialized pieces of equipment.

Despite its complexity, or perhaps because of it, the Pilates method offers ultimate programming versatility for a wide range of participants—from aging adults to elite athletes. The challenge here is designing a program that appeals to all levels of participants without leaving any group feeling frustrated or bored. Meeting this challenge requires a great deal of skill and training on the part of instructors, as well as a strong commitment to the program by senior management.

“The biggest thing we tell people is, ‘Don’t expect to get it all at first,’” says master trainer P. J. O’Clair, owner of The Studio, a Pilates studio and certification center located within the 25,000-square-foot North Shore Athletic Club in Beverly, Massachusetts. “Pilates is a discipline. It takes more than once or twice, but once people are hooked, it’s something they can do for the rest of their lives.”

Measuring Demand

While the recent rash of celebrity endorsements might propel people to your Pilates sessions, most managers and owners don’t need to be reminded that this impetus will do nothing to keep participants there. To retain members, you need to determine—*before* taking the Pilates plunge—what they really need, want and can afford. You can do this through face-to-face communication, surveys, focus groups and market research, all of which will provide insights into the approach you should take.

For example, if your membership consists primarily of middle-income women over 30, Pilates will likely appeal, but the cost of one-on-one equipment-based training sessions may not. In this case, you might want to consider starting with mat-based group classes.

If your clientele is made up of affluent, athletic professionals and you have adequate space and funds, you will be better positioned to integrate Pilates equipment into your facility. Oftentimes, the best approach is to start small and grow the

program as member demand increases.

“We started with a bite-size chunk—mat classes for several years—and built the interest and experience level, then added more classes and equipment,” says Gayle Winegar, owner of the SweatShop, a 15,000-square-foot fitness facility in St. Paul, Minnesota. “We have grown our program year by year.”

Researching Your Options

Understanding the benefits of Pilates and assessing member demand are important steps, but they don’t provide reason enough to launch a full-fledged program. In addition to reading all you can on the subject, try taking some private and group sessions at a studio near you, examine videos from the various providers of Pilates education, attend workshops at industry conventions, test equipment at trade shows and talk to others who have already implemented a successful program. Finally, do the math: Will Pilates bring more people into your facility? Will you be able to charge more for sessions or develop a profitable Pilates studio within your facility? Will member retention increase as a result of the program?

Before launching a Pilates program at the 7,500-square-foot Special Care Holistic Wellness Connection in New Britain, Connecticut, practice manager and licensed massage therapist Kristopher Kory did his homework. “I researched two main [equipment] companies before making my decision. I also called and visited people who had the products already in use. I attended education programs and watched videos regarding both programs, too. I decided to go with a company that puts a priority on education and is therefore able to support the program with ongoing training as well as quality equipment.”

Ultimately, Kory chose to offer members a comprehensive program comprising mat classes that blend Pilates and yoga; one-on-one equipment training in a personal training studio; and group equipment sessions in a dedicated room. As further proof of the myriad options available, he also incorporates Pilates equipment work into existing indoor group cycling classes for toning and stretching work.

Finding Qualified Instructors

Most experts agree that the key to any solid fitness program is the quality of the instructors. The same holds true for Pilates. Becoming a competent Pilates instructor— one who is able to develop programs for a broad range of clients—requires thorough training, patience, a watchful eye and an ability to coach clients effectively.

“To succeed with a Pilates program, you need really good instructors who are confident enough in the practice to teach it with patience,” says Shirley Archer, JD, MA, a Pilates trainer and program consultant based in Palo Alto, California. “People who have been fortunate enough to receive training from competent, committed instructors will experience phenomenal results. And the results speak for themselves.”

In the worst-case scenario, a poorly trained instructor could be responsible for injuring a member. In the best-case scenario, a talented and well-trained instructor will wow your clients and generate positive word-of-mouth that will sell the program for you. The question is, How do you find qualified Pilates instructors? First, you must decide whether you need an instructor certified in mat work, use of the reformer (the primary piece of Pilates equipment) or the full repertoire of Pilates exercises and equipment. If you plan to start your program by offering only mat classes, you might be lucky enough to find a mat-certified instructor among your current staff or through your local college dance program (many excellent Pilates instructors are former dancers). Finding instructors qualified to

Pilates

teach participants on the reformer or on the other pieces of studio equipment is considerably harder.

“The good news is that Pilates is a career choice for instructors, not just a sideline, which is great for clubs and for members,” says John Boyd, program manager of New York City’s Chelsea Piers Sports Club, which has successfully been offering Pilates for close to three years and recently purchased an additional nine reformers to meet member demand.

Training Existing Staff

Some Pilates educators now offer a number of training solutions, including introductory workshops and intensive courses for fitness professionals. Training can usually be offered on-site at your facility in short, convenient modules that allow instructors to teach certain class formats and levels as they work toward certification. Another alternative is to select the key instructors you want to spearhead your program and send them to a designated certification center for training. Whichever

most economical way to build a consistently trained team. Some educators offer significant discounts on the equipment required to conduct the on-site training.

Then there is the matter of who pays for the training. Some facility operators require instructors to pay for their own training or work to pay it off. Others view instructor training as an investment in the future success of the program and foot the bill entirely if instructors work exclusively at their facility.

“The biggest issue for us is that instructors are certified by a reputable organization and can show proof of certification,” says Boyd. This is good practice. Be wary of educational providers that claim to certify instructors in a matter of days and those that do not include contemporary principles of exercise science in their curriculum. And watch out for providers that claim to teach the exercise method exactly as “Joe” taught it. While Joseph Pilates was ahead of his time, much has changed in the world of exercise science since his death in 1967.

Because anyone can now use the word *Pilates*, it’s important to understand that not all Pilates training and certification programs are created equal. Certification courses can take anywhere from 15 to 800 hours, depending on the level of certification, the type of program (mat, reformer or full equipment) and the instructor’s educational background. Owners and managers need to investigate the available programs and courses to ensure that they offer more than classroom lectures and an exam. Hands-on training and mandatory practice are key to developing a thorough understanding of the exercises and the equipment. Instructors should also be taught more than choreography if they expect to keep clients challenged and motivated. Ask if the program or course teaches instructors how to create innovative classes and modify exercises for those with physical limitations.

Here are some general guidelines to use when comparing different Pilates certifying agencies (these represent the minimum requirements for beginning- to intermediate-level Pilates certification):

mat certification = 40 hours
reformer certification = 50 hours
cadillac, chair and barrels certification = 50 hours

Keep in mind that courses are often offered as weekend training modules and certification can usually be done in stages. In general, an equivalent number of course hours should be dedicated to observation, review and practice teaching. Certification should

be granted only upon successful completion of both a practical and a written exam.

“The intricacy of Pilates movement is why it works. It’s also why it can’t be learned in a weekend,” cautions O’Clair. “Introductory workshops are good to gauge level of interest and learn some new skills to integrate into your current program offerings. But if you want your Pilates programs to be successful in the long term, you need to establish a strong foundation, and that foundation starts with serious training.”

Designing & Equipping Your Pilates Program

The wide variety of exercises and class formats available will allow you to work Pilates-based programming into almost any budget. At the most basic level, the only equipment

Before taking the Pilates plunge, determine what members really need, want and can afford.

training path you choose, the curriculum and certification requirements should be comparable.

Some clubs have opted to become host training sites. Under this arrangement, Pilates educators train a couple of your instructors (this is negotiable) in exchange for using your space and for opening registration to others in your area. This hosting arrangement is often the fastest and

required is a mat for each participant. Mat-based group classes act as a primer and also as a balance to more personalized, equipment-based sessions.

Once you have introduced members to Pilates through a basic mat class, you'll be able to teach classes that incorporate some of the smaller equipment, such as resistance rings, bands and barrels. Such additions increase variety and challenge while preparing participants to move on to the larger equipment.

Mat-Based Classes

Mat-based classes focus on developing core stability and learning the basic biomechanical principles of Pilates. The number of mat-based Pilates classes scheduled per week can vary widely, with some clubs offering about four and others providing as many as 20. Most program directors and instructors recommend always offering a few introductory mat classes for new participants. "I've learned that the best way to introduce Pilates into a club setting is to give members a chance to see it, experience a taste and ask questions," advises Archer. "Always offer an introductory class."

Whether you elect to allow members to drop in on a class or require that they sign up for a series of mat classes will depend largely on your objectives and your clientele. To keep members interested, O'Clair offers a variety of drop-in classes. Archer, on the other hand, is adamant about requiring people to commit to a series of classes.

Another decision to make is whether to charge above the regular membership fee for mat-based classes. This, too, will depend on your facility. Clubs that charge more than \$60 a month tend to offer mat classes (with or without small equipment) as part of membership. According to the 5th Annual IDEA Fitness Programs and Equipment Report (see October 2000 issue of *IDEA Fitness Manager*), close to 40 percent of the responding facilities that offer Pilates charge

a fee in addition to the membership fee, whereas 65 percent include Pilates sessions as part of membership. Other facilities offer a Pilates package to nonmembers as a way to reach out to and entice new people. A series of 12 classes over six weeks can run nonmembers anywhere from \$120 to \$180.

Equipment-Based Sessions

The reformer, which resembles a sleek rowing machine, is the key piece of equipment used in Pilates workouts. While the reformer lets users work their entire body, it also challenges core stability against resistance when the arms and legs are moving.

Unlike mat classes, reformer training ideally should be conducted one-on-one or in a small group (4-6 people) under the watchful eye of a certified instructor. This personal attention provides opportunities for the instructor to teach participants how to perform the exercises precisely for maximum effectiveness and injury prevention; it also helps members stay motivated and feel less resentful about having to pay a premium. Many facilities require clients to sign up for five introductory semiprivate or private sessions at a cost ranging from \$160 to \$250 to prepare them for group reformer classes.

You can start an equipment-based Pilates program with no more than a single reformer and one certified instructor. In such a scenario, space requirements are minimal and the initial equipment cost can be as little as \$2,500 to purchase one reformer. This modest investment can spark referrals and create the buzz you need to be successful over the long term. A single purchase like this can also create a flow from small-group classes to personalized training.

Dedicating a separate area or studio to your equipment-based Pilates program is ideal. If possible, allocate between 600 and 1,500 square feet. A space the size of a squash court (672 square feet) will comfortably hold five reformers, a cadillac (a stretching and strengthening device about the size of a four-poster bed), a wall unit and other associated equipment and props. A studio this size will enable you to offer different types of classes and will demonstrate your commitment to providing an environment conducive to mind-body exercise. Dedicating space for your equipment also means your Pilates classes can generate income all day as opposed to competing for openings in your multipurpose group fitness studio.

"In my opinion, clubs should not get into reformer classes unless they can dedicate a room specifically to Pilates," recommends Kory. "However, many mat classes can be put together using small Pilates equipment, which can be used in the same group training room as aerobics classes."

If you have no available space, you may want to consider a trade arrangement. Allan Lockhart, owner of the North Shore Athletic Club in Beverly, Massachusetts, leases an 800-square-foot studio space to O'Clair. In exchange, O'Clair oversees the Pilates mat programs at Lockhart's club. "I would definitely recommend this kind of exchange arrangement to other club owners," says Lockhart. "It's a perfect marriage because it provides our members with a fitness method that is different yet still something they can relate to. They're excited by it."

When it comes to equipping your facility, you'll want to do some long-term thinking and rely on your research findings. Some equipment, like the kind marketed on television, is decidedly not for commercial use. The highest-quality equipment is constructed for performance, adjustability (for participants' height and strength), versatility and durability, making it ideal for personalized training and small-group exercise. Again, don't be swayed by manufacturers who claim their equipment is based on Joseph Pilates' original designs and dimensions. Like exercise science, equipment engi-

Suggested Timeline for Pilates Program Launch

1-2 years before	Find out all you can about Pilates, including its benefits, the kind of people who love it, the clubs that have had success with it, the different approaches to the method itself, and the various training and equipment options. Try it at local studios, conferences and trade shows. If you're not the key decision maker, make sure to keep senior management informed along the way. Poll your members to find out what their interests are and how much they are willing to pay for premium programming.
9-16 months before	Map out your programming plans. Decide whether you will begin by offering mat-only classes or mat-plus-small-equipment classes. Create a strong business plan, including financial projections. Establish criteria for hiring instructors and decide which certifications you will accept. Decide if you want to recruit experienced instructors, train staff locally or conduct on-site training. Remember, your instructors can make or break your program, and proper training takes longer than many of the general fitness certifications in the industry, so plan ahead! Prepare a marketing plan and start informing members and staff. Meet with your facility's key managers to outline your plans.
6 months before	Start getting your instructors trained and certified at the level you've determined meets your standards and your programming plans. Finalize your marketing plan by identifying programming selections, recommending pricing strategies and outlining promotional tactics. Get equipment quotes (if you didn't already negotiate equipment with on-site training) and estimated delivery times. Review space and facility requirements with relevant staff and outside contractors. Double-check equipment dimensions against space or storage allocation. Remember to ask suppliers for any available marketing support. Meet with department heads and staff to discuss your progress and upcoming plans.
5 months before	Work with your marketing team to develop all relevant creative material, including ads, flyers, media kits and launch invitations. Utilize any prepackaged marketing support pieces received from suppliers. Oversee any facility upgrades and ensure that all plans are on schedule. Hold an update meeting with department heads.
4 months before	Keep members and staff posted on your progress (they'll keep asking) via in-house communication vehicles. Distribute articles about Pilates to staff. Ensure all facility upgrades are underway and on schedule. Start holding monthly master and introductory mat classes to generate staff and member interest.
3 months before	Place equipment orders now, allowing a minimum of four to six weeks for manufacturing and delivery. Outline program policies and procedures. Draw up initial class and associated-fee schedules. Have instructors sign any relevant employee contracts.
2 months before	Hold a pep rally with all relevant staff to review programs, registration, promotional plans, pricing, schedules, policies and procedures.
1 month before	Place ads and send out launch invitations. Ensure all equipment and initial instructor schedules are in place. Hold an instructor-only meeting to review detailed policies regarding class formats. Have instructors test all equipment and make any necessary adjustments. Provide instructors with business and club referral cards. Hang "Coming Soon" posters or banners. Do some role-playing with instructors and front-desk staff to ensure all procedures are in place and all staff are completely knowledgeable about the program.
2 weeks before	Send out a media alert. Walk the facility and note any last-minute requirements. Provide staff with promotional T-shirts to be worn leading up to the launch.
Launch Day!	Enjoy the fruits of your hard work when members, media representatives and members of the community show up in droves. Then take a deep breath and start booking clients!
2 days after	Send a press kit to media representatives who did not attend the launch, then follow up with a personal invitation to attend your next promotional class (or do a one-on-one session with your best trainer).
1 month after	Review the first month of operation and make adjustments as needed. Roll out the rest of your promotional plan. This should include ongoing communication with members and staff, promotional sessions, and mutual referrals with allied health professionals.
3 months after	Hold a formal follow-up meeting with instructors to review the program. Evaluate the types of classes that are most successful, address client issues, and determine which special events or new class formats you want to implement. Schedule meetings every three months to review the program. Give yourself a big pat on the back for starting a program that members and management will be able to profit from for years to come!

neering and design have advanced tremendously over the past few decades. And while some equipment is designed to stack or roll into place, many Pilates experts say that hauling and storing devices can be more challenging than finding a dedicated Pilates area.

Finally, facility owners and managers might want to consider manufacturers who offer training, certification and support in addition to equipment.

“Integrating Pilates into your facility is a much different kind of consideration than simply purchasing equipment,” offers Winegar, whose company’s gross revenues from Pilates have doubled over the past four years. “It’s a commitment to a direction, to training, to a long-term program. And it’s a commitment that’s definitely worth it if done wisely.”

Generating Revenue

Implementing a Pilates program creates financial opportunities for facilities—opportunities such as premium pricing, increased membership, better retention and long-term profitability.

According to Bill Abramson, general manager of New York City’s Chelsea Piers Sports Club, “Pilates definitely adds to the bottom line—in terms of revenue but also in terms of the more nebulous things, like attracting and retaining members. People will join because you are offering it, and they will also stay longer.”

The good news is your Pilates program can generate revenue regardless of the size of your facility or staff. Say you decide to dedicate a space approximately the size of a squash court (672 square feet) to a Pilates studio for equipment-based sessions while also using your existing group fitness area for mat-based classes. To appreciate the range of available options, consider how the following two scenarios differ in terms of staffing, number of classes and revenue. Since session

fees vary from region to region, we have used what we believe (based on our research) to be reasonable averages. Both scenarios would require the same amount of equipment. (The cost of purchasing equipment and the hourly rates for instructors are explained below, after the monthly income totals for both scenarios.)

In scenario number one, a facility that has only three trained Pilates instructors can easily bring in more than \$27,000 per month in revenue by offering 60 private equipment-based sessions, 18 semiprivate equipment-based sessions, 10 small-group reformer classes and 12 mat classes a week. Here’s a breakdown of that monthly income:

Scenario 1 Monthly Income (3 instructors):

60/week	private sessions	(\$50 each x 1 person)	\$ 3,000
18/week	semiprivate sessions	(\$30 each x 2 people)	\$ 1,080
10/week	small-group reformer classes	(\$20 each x 4 people)	\$ 800
12/week	mat classes	(\$10 each x 16 people)	\$ 1,920
Total Monthly Income (\$6,800 x 4):			\$27,200

In scenario number two, if the same facility were to add an additional seven trained Pilates instructors it could expect to generate more than \$68,000 per month. (Again, the equipment needed for this scenario is the same as for scenario 1.) Here’s a breakdown of that monthly income:

Scenario 2 Monthly Income (10 instructors):

150/week	private sessions	(\$50 each x 1 person)	\$ 7,500
95/week	semiprivate sessions	(\$30 each x 2 people)	\$ 5,700
25/week	small-group reformer classes	(\$20 each x 4 people)	\$ 2,000
12/week	mat classes	(\$10 each x 16 people)	\$ 1,920
Total Monthly Income (\$17,120 x 4):			\$68,480

Equipment Investment:

While both scenarios require the same equipment investment, keep in mind that having more instructors allows you to maximize your investment.

5	reformers (@ \$2,503 each)	\$12,515
1	cadillac/trapeze unit	\$ 2,546
1	wall unit	\$ 846
1	ladder barrel	\$ 1,104
2	Split Pedal Stability Chair® units (@ \$761 each)	\$ 1,522
16	Flex-Band® exercisers (@ \$5.50 each*)	\$ 88
16	Fitness Circle® exercisers (@ \$50 each*)	\$ 800
Total Equipment Costs:		\$19,421**

*Single-unit costs are based on bulk pricing.

**Amortized over three years, monthly payments would be approximately \$540 plus interest.

Instructors’ Hourly Rates:

Scenario 1 (3 instructors):

100 hours/week (@ \$30/hour)	\$ 3,000
Total Monthly Fees for Instructors (\$3,000 x 4):	\$12,000

Scenario 2 (10 instructors):

282 hours/week (@ \$30/hour)	\$ 8,460
Total Monthly Fees for Instructors (\$8,460 x 4):	\$33,840

Net Income:

Here are the net monthly incomes for both scenarios after subtracting instructors' fees and monthly equipment payments from total monthly incomes derived from classes/sessions:

Scenario 1:	\$ 7,200	(monthly income from classes/sessions)
	-\$ 540	(monthly equipment payment)
	-\$ 12,000	(monthly fees for instructors)
	\$14,660	(scenario 1 net monthly income)
Scenario 2:	\$68,480	(monthly income from classes/sessions)
	-\$ 540	(monthly equipment payment)
	-\$ 33,840	(monthly fees for instructors)
	\$34,100	(scenario 2 net monthly income)

Note: Other facility operating expenses would need to be factored into the monthly costs cited above. Additional revenue can be generated by selling Pilates-related products, such as videos and small props. These are great tools to keep people motivated when they travel and can't make it to class.

Marketing Your Pilates Program

As with all good marketing plans, you should start to plan months before your program launch (see "Suggested Timeline for Pilates Program Launch" sidebar). Start by identifying your target markets—both inside and outside of your facility—using facility and local demographic information, along with the results of your original research. If you plan to offer both mat-based classes and private equipment training, keep in mind that the markets for these two options will be somewhat different.

In addition to carefully developing program formats and pricing, the most successful (and least costly) strategies you can use to create awareness and demand for your Pilates program will involve grassroots marketing tactics. These include referral programs, promotional events, media relations and internal communications, such as instructor announcements, newsletters, e-mail broadcasts, in-house television bulletins, posters and flyers. Another cost-effective marketing medium that should not be overlooked is your facility's Web site. Traditional print advertising and direct mail, though typically more costly, should also be considered as ways to attract new members or enhance your club's image.

Keep in mind that you don't want to disappoint people by promising more than you can deliver. Although a short waiting list to get into classes isn't necessarily a bad thing (it can create a buzz when you launch the program), members will either give up or move on if you can't deliver the goods within a reasonable period of time. For other ways to successfully promote your program, see "Top 10 Pilates Marketing Strategies" sidebar.

Finally, strike while it's hot! Although Pilates is certain to remain popular, it is always best to take advantage of a trend while it is basking in the spotlight. "Pilates is currently enjoying a lot of media attention and widespread growth," says Archer. "As a practice, I believe, Pilates will remain strong for participants who enjoy mind-body exercise. People who are fortunate enough to receive training from competent, committed instructors experience phenomenal results. Pilates will prevail because it delivers results. And the results speak for themselves."

Lindsay Merrithew and Moira Stott-Merrithew are leaders in the growing field of Pilates-based exercise. They are founders and owners of STOTT EDUCATION™ and STOTT EQUIPMENT™, subsidiaries of Merrithew Corporation.

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Top 10 Pilates Marketing Strategies

1. Involve staff and club members from the get-go!
2. Carefully develop your class schedule and fee structure.
3. Hire the best instructors and then promote their credentials to your members.
4. Ensure front-office staff are clear on all registration procedures and can effectively sell the program.
5. Consult with your equipment suppliers or professional association to see what kind of marketing support they can provide.
6. Alert the media! Prepare a press kit, including a news release about your new program, relevant instructor bios and photos, club background and a fact sheet.
7. Conduct regular master classes for your other group instructors and personal trainers to help them cross-sell the program.
8. Build relationships with local health practitioners (e.g., chiropractors, massage therapists, physical therapists, etc.) and health insurers to develop a mutually beneficial referral program.
9. Provide individual attention and incentives to continually encourage participants.
10. Keep creating, promoting and communicating long after the launch of your program; new programs, classes and equipment will help keep members and staff motivated and challenged.