

PROGRAMMING FOR

Real Women

If your business strategy isn't in touch with today's women, you are missing out on a considerable market. [By Dawn Braud, MS](#)

Women constitute 52 percent of commercial health club members, according to a 2000 report from the International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association (IHRSA 2002). In addition, 59 percent of the members in medical fitness centers are women, according to a 1999 report from the Medical Fitness Association (MFA 1999).

Even more important may be the fact that women make most consumer decisions. In her book, *EVEolution: Understanding Women—Eight Essential Truths That Work in Your Business and Your Life*, Faith Popcorn describes the “economic traction that women have in today’s market.” Just look at the statistics:

- Women buy or influence 80 percent of all consumer goods.
- Women make or influence 80 percent of all health care decisions.
- Forty-eight percent of all investors in the stock market are female.
- Women head 40 percent of households with assets worth over \$600,000.

These figures show that women are a market of savvy consumers and we need them. We must be careful, however, for we will miss this market if our ads and programs tout photos of young women who are a perfect size 6 and scantily dressed—or promote vanity in the way of thinness and physical beauty. Choosing this type of marketing means we are out of touch with *real* women.

While the fitness industry's overall message may be directed at the general public, there are differences between the population that joins facilities and the public at large. Some of the differences are gender related, and consequently some messages we send to the general public may not appeal to women. This article will examine women's particular needs and relate them to program design and marketing strategies.

Life Stages: "A Woman Leads Many Lives Over Her Lifetime."

Before we can design programs and marketing strategies, we first need to understand our market. For purposes of simplicity, we can differentiate women by stages. These stages are related to the physical and psychosocial changes most women experience. While this segmentation is not meant to be exclusive, you can use it to match programs to participants, which will ultimately increase your success. Additionally, this differentiation makes it easier to choose marketing strategies.

A woman's life is marked by transitions that are influenced primarily by hormones and the aging process. These influences are powerful and greatly affect a woman's behavior and needs. In *Targeting the New Professional Woman*, author Gerry Myers suggests we need to understand how a woman feels. "When she walks into a store, sees a commercial or looks at the package design of a product, all the years she has been a woman play a part in her thought processes and her reaction to the situation." It is through this understanding that we become better group exercise instructors, trainers, program directors and business owners.

Checking for Diastasis Recti

Diastasis recti is a separation of the rectus abdominis that may occur during pregnancy and may persist after delivery. To check for diastasis recti in one of your clients, take the following steps:

- Have the client lie supine with bent knees.
- Kneel beside her, place two fingers above the navel and press gently.
- Have her perform a curl-up until her scapulae are off the floor.
- Measure the number of fingers that can be inserted between the recti muscles 2 inches above the navel, at the navel and 2 inches below the navel.

If there is less than a two-finger-width separation, the client can begin most abdominal exercises. If there is a three-finger-width separation, she should do stability exercises, avoiding most spinal flexion and rotation exercises. If the separation is wider than four fingers, refer the client to her physician. She may need physical therapy.

The Childbearing Years

All women will go through the childbearing years, but not all will have children. For those who do, the physical changes are extensive. Pregnancy affects nearly every system in our body.

Designing programs for pregnant women isn't just a matter of making things a little "lighter and easier"; it's more a matter of addressing the specific physical and emotional changes women might experience. These are some of the physical changes that occur during pregnancy:

- Joints "soften," allowing for the baby's growth. The joints most affected are the sacroiliac (hip) and the pubic symphysis (pubic bone). Exercises that promote hip stability can lessen pain and discomfort.
- Gait alters, because of changes in the tendons and ligaments of the feet. Exercises that strengthen the arches of the feet and peroneal muscles can improve gait.
- Blood volume increases, and venous return decreases. The subsequent blood pooling and edema (swelling) may cause problems such as hemorrhoids. Pregnant participants should avoid prolonged standing during exercise, as well as the Valsalva maneuver.

Often, pregnant women are very inquisitive about their physical changes and have numerous questions about what is "normal." A prenatal program provides an excellent opportunity for education. This type of program can also promote group interaction. Having time in class for introductions and for sharing experiences can prove very valuable to women and will increase adherence. However, when leading a prenatal program, you should monitor and limit the sharing of anecdotal information and avoid interjecting your own personal experiences.

Also, keep in mind that most pregnant women are very concerned about gaining weight and may struggle with body image. While you can assure them that exercise and good nutrition habits are important in weight management, try to avoid talking extensively about weight loss and weight gain and suggest participants discuss these issues with their physicians.

Some of the emotional changes women experience during pregnancy include heightened stress and anxiety and even depression. These changes may be related to hormone fluctuations and anticipation of the upcoming changes in their lives and bodies. Regular exercise and the social support of group exercise can help women cope with stress and anxiety.

Deliverance: The Postpartum Days

"As I followed my trainer across the gym, all I could think about was how my new baby was doing in the nursery. It was the first

time I had left her with a stranger. When he asked me if I was ready to get started with my exercises, I burst into tears. He just stared at me. I don't think he knew what to say."

These words from a new mom aren't unusual. After the baby arrives, there continue to be physical changes—and more emotional challenges than ever. Some of the obstacles to postpartum exercise that accompany the physical changes include competing demands, lack of information about weight retention, fear of interference with breast-feeding and stress incontinence (Ringdahl 2002).

The Physical Challenges. Physical changes that affect the musculoskeletal system may include abdominal weakness, back pain, sacroiliac dysfunction, pubic and tailbone pain, and a weakness of the pelvic floor muscles, which often causes urine leakage.

Abdominal changes can be dramatic after pregnancy. Some women experience mild to severe separation of the abdominal wall. This separation, called diastasis recti, is fairly easy to assess. The assessment technique (described in "Checking for Diastasis Recti" on the previous page) is a valuable tool for trainers and class leaders.

Programs that incorporate exercises to address these issues will improve the well-being of new moms and help them stay with their exercise routine.

The Issue of Weight Loss. After delivery, many women become even more concerned about their body image than they were before. Those who have not returned to their prepregnancy weight in about 6 months will most likely retain the extra weight. It is important to understand that this extra weight may have a psychological impact on a woman; she may become frustrated and depressed. Educating new moms on the importance of proper exercise and nutrition is important, but equally important may be helping them juggle their own needs with those of their babies. Closely monitor your clients' behavior and use lots of verbal encouragement to help them stay on track.

Exercise and Breast-Feeding. Some nursing moms may be concerned that exercise might have a negative effect on breast-feeding. Studies have shown, however, that moderate aerobic exercise has no such impact on breast-feeding.

Time Constraints. Finding time to take a nap, let alone time for exercise, is a big challenge for new moms. Therefore, offering parent-friendly programming is an excellent way to attract and retain mothers (and fathers, for that matter!). At the Fitness and Therapy Center at The Woman's Hospital of Texas in Houston, mother-and-baby classes are the most popular ones with new moms. According to Tracy Sher, MPT, these classes incorporate exercises for both the mom and the baby. "Moms hold the babies during many of the exercises, and there is lots of mother-baby and baby-baby interaction. I am amazed at how much these moms bond to each other. They become a support group,"

says Sher. They also offer mother-baby personal training, in which babies can stay with their moms while they work out.

Approaching Middle Age and Perimenopause

Perimenopause is defined as the time leading up to menopause and is marked by a fluctuation of hormones. This fluctuation is often described as a roller coaster ride, because the decline in hormones is erratic rather than steady. This stage may begin as early as 10 years before menopause, when menstruation actually ceases. Because perimenopause can last so long, it may be difficult for fitness professionals to assess and identify how its symptoms might be affecting their clients.

During perimenopause many women experience mood swings, memory loss, bone loss, cholesterol changes, hot flashes and sleep disturbances—to name just a few of the symptoms. That's the bad news. The good news is that exercise can help diminish these symptoms, providing great motivation to stay active.

Women at this stage in their lives also experience a drop in metabolism, owing to changes in hormones and muscle mass. In her book, *Fight Fat After Forty*, Pamela Peeke, MD, MPH, describes a "shape shifting" phenomenon in women. She writes, "Estrogen levels become more erratic, waxing and waning, and the storage site of fat shifts to the abdomen." Fitness professionals are often bombarded with questions about how to "get rid of this tummy." Educating women on why this is happening and what impact exercise and diet can have on this issue is extremely beneficial.

Perimenopause is a critical period for a woman's health. During this time, good health habits—like regular exercise and good nutrition—are vital in order to see her into the next stage of her life.

Menopause: A Transitional Time

Menopause is defined as the 12 months after a woman's final menstrual period, usually around the age of 52. As of the year 2000, approximately 50 million women in the United States were over the age of 50, and many baby boomers are currently turning 50. These women are in our facilities and classes, and they have questions and concerns about how their bodies are changing. They are seeking answers from each other, their doctors and us.

According to Elizabeth Lee Vliet, MD, in her book, *Screaming to Be Heard: Hormonal Connections Women Suspect . . . and Doctors Ignore*, women lose about 66 percent of their estrogen and 50 to 60 percent of their testosterone after menopause. Because estrogen declines at a faster rate than testosterone, the influence of the latter may surface. In most cases body fat is redistributed from the hips to the midsection and blood pressure and cholesterol levels rise. All these changes can put women at a higher risk for cardiovascular

disease.

Woman's Hospital in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, has developed a menopause lecture series that covers topics of interest to menopausal women. The series has been extremely successful, with attendance growing each year. Harriet Walters, RN, coordinates the series. "The lectures have to be fun, with door prizes, refreshments and giveaways so the women feel nurtured," she says. The topics are derived from focus groups, surveys and program evaluations. The lectures have humorous names rather than clinical sounding titles, which don't attract women in this age group. For instance, rather than titles like "Preventing Osteoporosis" or "Heart Disease in Menopausal Women," the programs have catchy names, such as "The Hormone Superhighway: Pills, Patches and Creams" or "What's Testosterone Got to Do With It?" These educational opportunities are a good way to bring women into a facility and let them know you hear them and are aware of their concerns.

The Mature Woman

Many of the normal effects of aging are compounded by a sedentary lifestyle. Normal changes include decreases in aerobic exercise tolerance; reaction time; muscle mass, strength and endurance; and bone mass and density.

According to the National Osteoporosis Foundation, about 10 million Americans have osteoporosis; most of them are women. Another 34 million have low bone mass, which places them at increased risk for the disease. Osteoporosis leads to about 300,000 hip fractures each year (NOF 2002). With age, women lose more bone than men do and so are more susceptible to fractures from falling. From an exercise standpoint, fitness professionals can help these statistics. The NOF recommends 45 to 60 minutes of weight-bearing exercise four times per week. In addition, balance training and fall prevention programs are extremely beneficial to women, especially in the "mature" stage of life.

The Woman's Fitness Center, also in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, offers a strength and balance training program for women over 65. Certified personal trainer Pam Stone developed the program.

"I designed the program to include exercises that would challenge balance skills enough to be useful to women in their everyday lives. For example, we have an obstacle course that simulates stepping off a curb. At first the women say things like, 'I can't do that.' And when they discover they *can*, it is very rewarding to them—and me," says Stone.

Psychological considerations in this later stage may include depression, loneliness and apprehension about change. With regard to exercise, women may lack self-confidence if they are unfamiliar with exercise programs and equipment. While physical activity is known to have a positive effect on depression and mood, you will have to motivate mature women to stay with their

program. Also, because many of these women are widows, you should strongly encourage the socialization aspects of exercise. You can do this easily in a class setting or by arranging social activities for your senior members.

Training Considerations: Women Differ From Men

The unique life stages women go through make their exercise needs very different from those of men. Again, this is primarily because women experience a lifetime of hormone fluctuations and, in many cases, childbearing. Compared to men, women have a stronger need for postural and core stabilization, pelvic floor exercise and weight-bearing routines. There may also be different psychological considerations, like lack of self-efficacy, unfamiliarity with exercise equipment and apprehension. The exercise programs that serve women best are those that center on these training differences.

"Start first with an understanding of what being a female means," says Ann Cowlin, MA, of Yale University's athletic department and school of nursing. Also, when designing programs for women, don't assume they are "variations of the male," cautions Cowlin, who is also founder of Dancing Through Pregnancy®.

By understanding women's needs and addressing them throughout your programming and your facility, you can have a significant

Putting It All Together

When planning, designing and promoting your program, keep the following in mind:

The Program

- What do members want? Conduct a focus group to find out.
- What form will the program take? Develop a detailed plan, drawing on feedback from members and staff.
- Where will referrals come from?
- Were women included in the planning?
- Who will lead the program? Are there any staff training needs?
- Is the program format fun?
- Are there ways to promote a bonding experience within the program?
- Is a marketing strategy in place?

Marketing and Advertising

- Is the marketing strategy consistent with the message of the program?
- Does the ad for your program reflect *real* women?
- Does the ad appear nurturing?
- Does the ad represent independent women with positive self-esteem?
- Is the ad family oriented?
- Is the ad nonintimidating?

impact on women's health and well-being. This impact will result in satisfied clients, larger classes and improved financial success.

Taking the Feminine Approach to Program Design

If you do not currently offer women's programming, first focus on just one life stage. For instance, if many of your members are older women, consider adding a women's strength training class. When that program proves successful, decide where to head next. If you do currently offer programs for women but would like to expand, choose a natural progression. For example, evolve from prenatal to postpartum exercise or add a balance class to your seniors' programs.

Also, keep in mind that some programs may not work in your geographical area. Raelynn Witting-Theiss, director of the Women's Wellness Center at Hunter Creek in Orlando, Florida, learned this when she tried to offer prenatal and postpartum classes. When these classes weren't successful, she discovered why. "Our facility is located in a very transitional area, so our members tend to stay away from programs that take a longer time commitment. We haven't been successful with [these classes] because the women aren't in our area very long."

Before starting a new program, find out if there is enough interest to proceed. If there is, consider whether you have a qualified instructor and decide on a program format.

First Confirm Interest. Before jumping into a new program, do your homework. Go on a fact-finding mission by conducting focus groups and/or surveys to gauge the interest level. Also, consider if you have a referral base for this new market (e.g., obstetricians who could make referrals to your prenatal classes or gerontologists who could refer older women to your fall prevention program).

Find the Right Instructor. The instructor needs, not only the skills to teach the program, but also the ability to relate well to your particular group of women.

Sabra Bonelli, MS, recommends that staff take sensitivity training before teaching specialized populations. Bonelli developed a program called "The Other Size of Fitness" for women size 16 or larger at the Mission Valley YMCA in San Diego. Early in the program development phase, she enlisted the help of a plus-sized employee, who discussed with the staff what it was like to live in a plus-sized body. This poignant message was invaluable in bringing about both attitude changes and alterations in the facility (these included changes to the lobby entry and furniture).

"[For 'The Other Size of Fitness,'] plus-sized and non-plus-sized teachers have both been effective. It's not appearance that matters, but presentation. The instructor of a plus-sized class of women needs to be friendly and capable of providing appropriate movements without being condescending. She should be encouraging,

motivating and genuine," says Bonelli.

Make the Format Fun—and Appropriate. You won't find women in Bonelli's plus-sized exercise class working hard to get their heart rates in the "training zone." Instead, the 60-minute class is mostly light exercise followed by an informal time spent sharing. Her program focuses on "acceptance and [on] developing a positive body image while also getting comfortable moving the body."

When designing your program, find ways to encourage the women to bond with one another and with your facility. At the Mission Valley Y, they host two to three "Size Acceptance" luncheons, says Bonelli. The luncheons feature a local plus-sized celebrity and a fashion show sponsored by a local store that carries plus-sized clothing. The luncheons are very successful in promoting the class and allowing women to bond with each other.

Emphasize the Experience. While the choreography or exercise format is important in program design, the overall experience is what really matters to women. Ask these questions when evaluating your program: Are we listening to women's needs? How is the environment set up? Are we consistent in our messages?

At Healthworks Fitness Centers in Boston, Maria Shea, regional director, states, "We feel it is really important to truly, sincerely *listen* to what women customers are asking for and then do our best to make it happen. This cannot happen with just lip service or insincerity. It is so important to long-term continued success to always pay attention to what our women members are telling us and try our best not to neglect any suggestion, question or concern or any type of feedback, positive or negative."

Marketing to Real Women

To attract this unique market, we can borrow from lessons learned in the advertising world. In *Targeting the New Professional Woman*, Myers states, "Manufacturers have begun to realize that if they want to attract women customers more successfully, they need to ask women what they want prior to designing and producing the product." The book also offers a list of dos and don'ts, which includes addressing a woman by her name, not as honey or sweetie; treating her with respect, rather than talking down to her; and understanding her need for networking, rather than treating her as an isolated sale.

Angela Broderick, MA, vice president of Club La Femme in Leawood, Kansas, has had success asking female radio DJs with a strong female audience to promote her programs. Broderick works out a trade with the DJs (memberships and personal training for radio spots and testimonials). These are real women who struggle with some of the same issues their listeners face. "There's nothing better than hearing another woman say that she comes to our club to exercise, that she enjoys it and that she gets results." In a similar

vein, Bonelli finds that using the Y's own members for ads and testimonials is a very effective way to attract women.

Loyalty Means Retention

Finally, remember that women are loyal customers when they connect with a product and bond with a service. Because of their loyalty, they become long-term members and clients. And most of us know that retaining members is less costly than finding new ones.

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