

The Power of Community Involvement

Go beyond tried-and-true techniques for getting and keeping members. By Valerie Applebaum, MPH, CHES

You've tried marketing campaigns, membership drives and special incentives—all the standard methods of increasing and retaining membership. Now that you've exhausted these methods, why not try something new?

According to IHRSA's annual Health Club Trend report, the number of health clubs in the United States grew by more than 7 percent in 2002, and, in fact, growth has been steady since 1998 (IHRSA 2003). Although this increase is great news for the health club industry, it also increases the competition for each individual club, since it means that each facility must work harder to retain existing members and earn new ones. How can *you* stand out as a superior gym? Get involved in your community!

Benefits of Helping the Community

Community service may rank low on your priority list given everything else you need to do to run your business. But moving this item higher on your to-do list could help you tap into the key to building business.

Community involvement may not seem directly associated with business gain, but many club owners are discovering that the two can go hand in hand. "Being an active part of the community your business is in—especially if all your clients come from the community—is just good business, plain and simple," says Bob Nelson, PhD, best-selling coauthor of *1001 Ways to Reward Employees* and *The 1001 Rewards & Recognition Fieldbook: The Complete Guide*. Nelson explains the benefits of getting involved: "It shows that you care enough about people in your community to help in many ways, not just ways that earn you revenue. They'll notice and want to help you succeed in return."

Demonstrating a strong sense of corporate responsibility through community involvement can potentially increase membership over time. Why? Your involvement generates goodwill. The publicity and media coverage most charitable events draw can serve as a discreet form of advertising for your facility. This subtle promotion makes a more valuable impression than any half-page, full-color magazine ad ever could. Ultimately your club's name becomes connected



in people's minds with these charitable events, and this association encourages the community to hold the club in high regard. When someone decides to join a health club, he will probably be more likely to select a gym he recognizes as one that gives back to the community rather than one that does not.

Serving the community can also instill a sense of pride in you and your employees. Your time and financial or "in-kind" contributions help important causes. With so many local aid organizations, national charities and commu-

nity service groups to choose from, you can truly make a difference by creating a stronger and healthier community.

Many Options for Involvement

Want to help your community? The opportunities for involvement abound.

You can choose from sponsoring charitable events held by other organizations; cohosting events with schools, nonprofit organizations or community centers; or creating your own events. Here are some examples of what facilities—both large,

international chains and local health clubs—are doing to make community involvement a priority.

Community Example 1: Bally Total Fitness

Bally Total Fitness is a prime example of an international health club chain that significantly contributes to charity. Bally began its Stronger Communities initiative in 1997. The clubs donate re-conditioned fitness equipment, unused fitness apparel and memberships to community service organizations that

10 Steps to Getting Involved

Ready to reach out? Use these tips to make a difference in your community:

- 1** Determine the precise amount of money and time your facility can offer.
- 2** Compile a list of charities and community groups that are important to your staff and members. Choosing a cause people are passionate about will inspire dedication to the event.
- 3** Contact your local chamber of commerce, local tourism office, the International Festivals & Events Association (www.ifea.com), and specific charities and community groups to obtain a list of charity events in your region. Add items of interest to your list.
- 4** Prioritize your list of suggested charities. Based on your budget and time constraints, select which one(s) you will support. (If you identify many worthwhile causes, you could assist a new charity or community group each year.)
- 5** Determine how you will become involved. One popular option is to donate funds as a sponsor of an event, such as a race or walk. If funds are limited, consider donating staff time to aid in organizing the event, or volunteering your facility as a place to hold the event.
- 6** Decide if you will participate in a one-time activity or an annual event.
- 7** Contact the selected organization or charity and ask about the required process for sponsoring an event or collaborating with the organization. Come to a clear agreement on costs and level of involvement.
- 8** If you decide to sponsor an existing event, consider being the dominant sponsor of a smaller event, rather than one of many sponsors of a larger one. A company's name and contributions tend to get lost when an event has many corporate sponsors.
- 9** Put out a press release. To increase the public's awareness of your club's charitable activity, send a press release on the day of the event detailing your facility's involvement.
- 10** Evaluate the impact of your club's efforts to help guide future charitable endeavors. One way to assess the benefits of your involvement is to observe membership sales during and immediately after the event. Conducting surveys on consumer awareness of your health club before and after the event can also yield interesting information.

Organizing your own philanthropic event is another fun alternative. Be creative. You may want to arrange an annual food, clothing or toy drive around the holidays or plan fundraisers such as walkathons, bike rides, aerobathons and health fairs.

serve the surrounding neighborhoods. Since the program's inception, Bally has donated over \$10 million worth of equipment, apparel and memberships to inner-city schools, at-risk-youth programs, boys' and girls' clubs, police and fire athletic leagues and other service organizations. Bally believes that contributing its time and knowledge is also important. When equipment is donated, Bally's personal trainers educate the people who will be using it.

Bally's commitment does not end there. The fitness franchise is an official sponsor of the Willye White Winners Dinner. (The Willye White Foundation is dedicated to empowering young women to challenge themselves athletically.) At this dinner Bally awards gym memberships to the honorees, encouraging these women to stay physically fit. In addition Bally has participated

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in Toys for Tots, the Make-A-Wish Foundation and the *Today Show* Toy Drive; and has sponsored events such as the Revlon Run/Walk and the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer 3-Day Walk.

Community Example 2: Gold's Gym

Another international chain with a heart is Gold's Gym. Each Gold's Gym

location is responsible for its own operation, so different facilities take part in different activities. Here are just some examples of how various locations help their communities:

- Gold's Gym in Hickory, North Carolina, organized an angel tree and a canned food drive during the holiday season.
- Gold's Gym in Fayetteville, Georgia, donated \$10 to the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts for every new membership during a full week in August 2001.
- Gold's Gym of Greenbrook, New Jersey, helped raise funds for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in September 2003 with its fitness aerobathon. Top fitness experts led boot camp, cardio hip-hop and basic fitness classes. A donation of \$20 was requested from participants and

T-shirts were given with additional donations. The staff held free drawings for Gold's Gym memberships and a 27-inch color television.

Community Example 3: Gainesville Health & Fitness Center

The Gainesville Health & Fitness Center (GHFC) is an example of a

local facility that gives back to its Florida community in several ways. Last year GHFC sponsored the American Heart Association's annual fundraising effort. In addition, each year the club adopts a local school and gives it equipment and cash donations. The center also offers a cash donation for a high-school graduation party thrown by the school district in an effort to keep graduating seniors from drinking and driving to and from parties on grad night.

Not only that, but GHFC employees also donate their time to educate the community. "We have gone to middle schools to talk for their career days," explains the club's Christie Matkozych, CSCS. "We go to retirement homes and talk to them about the benefits of exercise and what kinds of things they can do 'at home.' We go to businesses and talk to their employees about numerous topics such as weight management, stress management and the benefits of exercise. We also take body fat measurements, do balance testing and flexibility testing."

Community Example 4: American Family Fitness Centers

For the past 12 years, American Family Fitness (AFF) in Richmond, Virginia, has carried on a proud tradition of charitable work. Its five facilities conduct an annual fitness challenge to raise money for Children's Hospital, a pediatric facility with the mission of providing health care and financial assistance to children. During the challenge, club members choose five out of 10 activities and complete the tasks within a 1-week period. Activities

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include racquetball (60 minutes), basketball (30 minutes), swimming (30 minutes), an aquatics class (60 minutes), weight training (45 minutes), a group exercise class (60 minutes), a cardio equipment workout (45 minutes), cross training (45 minutes), stretching/abs (30 minutes) and karate/yoga (30 minutes). Participants obtain sponsors who pledge money for the event. The first challenge raised \$9,000, which paid for a microscope for the hospital. The second year the club raised \$10,856, which was used to buy arthroscopy equipment. The third year of the challenge brought in \$12,000, which paid for a vital signs monitor; and the fourth year collected \$15,873, which helped fund summer therapy and enrichment camps.

AFF decided to step up its tradition of giving in 2003. Last year marked the inaugural American Family Fitness Centers' 10K Run/5K Walk to benefit Children's Hospital. The whole community could participate, not just the club's staff and members. "Turnout

was surprisingly good for a first-time event in a city of Richmond's size," says Anne Buckley, AFF's director of public relations. "We assume that next year and the years after will generate more as people become accustomed to the new event and begin to anticipate it."

Reaching Out

Is it time for *your* facility to get more involved in your community? Your gym can quickly earn a positive reputation for being a community-based business, and you and your staff will reap rewards beyond just the financial. You can feel good knowing that your club is a proactive force of change.

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