

When It's Time to Change

Fitness facilities often have trouble knowing when to introduce new programs or personnel. Here are the main areas to consider for making the right choices.

By Donna Meyer

One aspect of being a successful director is the ability to spot a trend before it hits big. Capitalizing on the latest craze before the competition beats you to the punch takes gut instinct and a talented eye. It might be as simple as revising the time a class starts or choosing a new instructor. The following tips can help you determine when it's time to make a change and how to transition it smoothly.

Move On When Your Audience Does. When a class or program begins to lose popularity not attributable to normal seasonal attendance fluctuations, it may be time to make changes. Andrew Lloyd

Weber's famous musical *Cats* wooed Broadway audiences for 18 years. As attendance began to decrease in the last few years, Weber was smart enough to lower the curtains and move on to another project.

Take a Closer Look. When something is not working, take a step back and be objective. I once spoke with a club coordinator who informed me that her kickboxing program had "died," so she was yanking it from the schedule. Considering the program's initial success at her facility, I found this action odd. On further investigation, I learned that the original instructor had been replaced by someone with no group exercise experience. He was teaching a class on self-defense, and members did not enjoy it. The coordinator had no need to change the format—the demand for kickboxing at her club was still there—

she needed to find a suitable instructor. **Keep an Open Mind.** Several years ago I was standing next to a young woman in the Fitness Expo Hall during an IDEA World event. We were both watching these instructors demonstrate a new concept called group cycling. The woman commented, "Oh this will never work. Aerobics people won't ride stationary bikes." Little did she know it would develop into one of the hottest

fitness trends of the 1990s! To spot a trend, you have to think outside your personal realm of comfort or taste.

Don't Jump Too Soon. As director of group exercise for a national health club chain, I hear from companies

about the next "hottest" program all the time. In 1996 kickboxing was about to explode. Several businesses tried to persuade us to purchase heavy bags, gloves, kick shields and other boxing equipment. Although I felt pressure to jump on the trend, I also knew failure would prove costly.

So I did the research. I looked at costs, benefits, target markets and the clientele we serve. I took a risk and decided to try the program format without the equipment. I knew our competitors would have the heavy bags, but I felt these weren't right for us at the time. To this day, our kickboxing programs are among the strongest and most cost effective in the industry. It is sometimes difficult not to get caught up in the hype of the moment. Do your research, and don't jump before testing the waters.

When is the best time to offer your members something new? For owners, managers and program directors, knowing when to revamp part or all of your programs can be challenging. How do you know when it's time to change?

Avoid Personal Favoritism. An unbalanced schedule is almost always the sign of a coordinator who designs programs around personal preferences. You do not have to personally enjoy teaching a program for it to succeed at your facility. For example, you won't find me in a group cycling class until they can make a seat similar to the one in my car! That does not mean I don't embrace cycling. To stay ahead, you have to embrace all the programs you offer and educate yourself about them.

Remember It's a Business. As owner, manager, program director or all of the above, your decisions will not always make you popular. Never keep an instructor just to avoid confrontation. Never allow the egos of "super divas" or someone's hurt feelings scare you away from doing what's best for your facility. To reach your fullest potential, look at your program as a business. If people are not attending a class because of the instructor, make a change even if the instructor is a friend.

Avoid Overkill. If the menu, wait staff and table configurations changed every time you visited a favorite restaurant, would you keep going back? Most people crave familiarity. Some program directors change class schedules by 50 percent or more every single quarter—whether the classes are well attended or not. Not only is this practice a lot of work, it also may be unnecessary. Why not keep and build on your successes? Modify your schedule only where needed. Track class attendance carefully. Some classes will take six months to attain their potential.

Know How to Introduce Change. Change in fitness facilities should be

carefully orchestrated. Instructors and members alike need several weeks notice when making an adjustment in class format or time. Create a positive buzz in your club. Get key instructors and members involved in the promotion of the new program. Advertise the launch date throughout the facility. Make announcements at the beginning of all classes. Culminate the promotion by offering a special giveaway. When introducing a new format, use a team of your best instructors. Not only does this create extra energy and excitement, it also doubles the number of instructors endorsing the program.

Know How to Replace Instructors. While ample notice is suggested for most changes, replacing instructors is the exception. In my experience, little or no notice to members and staff is best, depending on the circumstances. Why? Because it will be difficult for the exiting instructor to remain positive. Moreover, some members may follow their favorite instructor instead of giving a new person a chance.

To generate smooth staff transitions, request that all new instructors arrive 20 minutes early to their first class to meet and greet each member individually. They should ask questions—such as what members enjoy most about the class—and be attentive listeners. They should talk a bit about themselves and then thank members for being patient while they get to know the class better. New instructors should remain positive, humble and confident; but they should never make apologies for the transition.

Here's what *not* to say: "I'm sure you guys would rather see Susie today..."

Such acknowledgment will only antagonize members. Here's what works better: "I'm very excited to teach for you today!"

Finally, if the previous instructor left on bad terms, keep this information to yourself. It is unprofessional to discuss the details of his or her departure with your members. Even the most relentless inquisition can be blunted with a smile and a reply of, "I'm really not sure."

Know Your Market and Your Members. Not everyone likes brussels sprouts. I have no doubt that these veggies are good for you, but I would not eat them if they were double dipped in chocolate. In the same sense, know your market and your members before trying to force-feed them a new program. If your early evening classes are heavily attended by nine-to-fivers driving fast sports cars and toting the newest cell phones, then changing their high-impact class to a mind-body format could spell disaster.

In summary, look at your program with a critical, unbiased eye. Imagine being the new member visiting the club for the first time. Is it sellable and marketable to appeal to various tastes? Changes can be the best boost to instructor and member interest when created and implemented with a strong business sense and sound reasoning.

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