

## The Unappreciated Asset: Group Exercise Programming

BY BOB ESQUERRE AND ABBIE APPEL

From our perspective, three words can describe the state of Group Exercise Programming: Valuable, Valuable and Valuable! Now notice that we used the word “programming” and not “classes.” Classes have a beginning and an end while programs, if structured correctly, are part of an on-going process/experience that is designed to become progressively more challenging as the participants become more proficient.



ABBIE APPEL

As members achieve success, their reason for staying at the club is increased — member retention is achieved and attrition is reduced. As the value of their club experience is increased, these happy members are more prone to refer their friends, associates and relatives, who are non-members, to join the club — member referrals are increased.

### RECRUITMENT, RETENTION & REFERRALS

These three magic words, when put together, are music to any club owner's ears. If the paragraph above represents your individual Club reality, please do not read any further. However, if this is not your reality, please continue reading this article.

### NOW HERE IS OUR REALITY QUESTION

If it is so easy for Group Exercise to be positioned as a membership retention tool, why is the fitness industry experiencing a 40%+/- attrition rate?

In reality, this attrition rate reflects the inability of clubs to adequately “connect” with their members after they join the club. In other words, clubs do a poor job matching member programming needs with the correct, member-specific Group Exercise Programs.



BOB ESQUERRE

### PROGRAMMING FOCUS

Clubs need to focus on programming needs that proactively target the following population types, which include both “inactive” (who could have been previously active) and “new exercisers.”

1. High-frequency club users
2. Low-frequency club users
3. Non-club users

Groups (2) & (3) are clearly high-risk “drop out” candidates.

### MAKING A CONNECTION

IHRSA studies have repeatedly shown that once a “connection” is made with any member, that member will tend to stay. The failure to successfully address the attrition rate issue reflects a club's inability to properly utilize a clear asset that it has taken for granted: Group Exercise Programming. We concur with the Body Training Systems [BTS] recommendation that clubs must approach Group Fitness Programming as a business. As a business, Group Exercise must provide a positive return-on-investment [ROI] that offsets the following: cost of studios, cost of studio-based equipment, instructor recruitment and training costs. The most important return that is missed and clearly not understood is the recruitment, retention and referral issue.

### THE BUSINESS OF GROUP EX

In order to manage Group Exercise as a business, the success and/or failure determination must be quantified by utilizing measurable key performance indicators. One prime indicator is the studio occupancy rate. The higher the occupancy rate per studio type, the higher the number of members who are consistently “touched” and/or connected with daily, weekly and monthly. BTS has shown a direct correlation between high studio occupancy rates, a positive member experience and a lower membership attrition rate. We also agree that this connection process is a factor: instructor persona,

instructor skill-sets, scheduling and program-type. As members experience more value from Group Exercise programming, they perceive a higher sense of value from the club's brand. As the value of the club brand increases, membership recruitment opportunities increase, membership retention increases, attrition decreases and member referrals increase. Thus the second performance indicator is the correlation/impact on retention vis-à-vis Group Exercise Programming.

## SUMMARY

Considering the above, the following summarizes our thoughts:

**1. Variety of Formats** — Currently, a successful Group Exercise Program means a variety of formats. There is something for everyone: strength, spinning, seniors, Pilates, tai chi, step aerobics, aqua, meditation, and the lists goes on. With so many formats, how could anyone get bored or ever reach a plateau?

**2. Addition of Pilates and Yoga** — In the past, we did much damage to our bodies by jumping around in high-impact classes and running with ankle weights. Integrating Pilates, Yoga, group cycling and other gentler/low impact forms of exercise into a workout regimen can contribute to moderation and balance in life, and can even contribute to a healthier body.

**3. Mindful Workouts** — Incorporating mind/body principles into mainstream or conventional group exercise programs helps participants develop better body

awareness that leads into their personal workouts and daily activities.

**4. Corrective Exercise in Group Setting** — Using Pilates and Yoga principles is corrective and functional. These principles contribute to improving form and technique in participants' other classes and again in daily life.

**5. Studio Occupancy Rates** — Programs like BTS and Les Mills have sensitized club owners to the correlation between high studio occupancy rates, club member involvement and member retention.

**6. Educated Group Exercise Instructor** — More and more Group Exercise Instructors consider fitness to be a career. This leads them to become more educated. Recently, the focus has been on correcting biomechanical deficiencies. In a group setting, we have to be realistic about how much we can fix. But, if we as instructors stress to participants in class the importance of good form, they are less likely to become injured and more likely to stay in class and reach their individual goals. This means group exercise participants can get a more personal experience while being involved in a group activity.

## VALUE OF GROUP EX

If structured correctly, the value of Group Exercise Programming will continue to grow because the future of the club industry is grounded in the value of a club's brand, which in fact reflects a club's value system. The club's value system is the reason why members join a club, retain

their membership and refer their non-member friends, family and associates to their club. Group Exercise Programming, in fact, has a high potential to "touch," "engage" and "affect" more members than any other Club Program.

**Food-For-Thought.....How well is your Group Exercise Programming Asset doing? ■**

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