

Improve group exercise attendance by simplifying the schedule, developing standard class outlines and implementing instructor team-building.

In recent years, attendance in the group exercise room has waned. Some fitness centers have even considered repurposing the space they currently dedicate to group fitness. This is a mistake.

A great group exercise program brings large amounts of people into one area of your facility at the same time. While doing that, it also frees up equipment. In addition, imagine the effect when a salesperson opens the group fitness room door and shows a prospective member a packed, jammin' class.

A group fitness director's job, then, becomes building the largest participant base possible. A strong co-ed group exercise program can be the best selling point a facility can have.



Group fitness stats

At one time, "aerobics" classes were huge. They helped catapult the fitness craze of the '80s, and built fitness centers out of community centers and dance studios. But "aerobics" has developed a stigma. Most people believe group fitness is feminine and complicated. Group fitness schedules are confusing to read — filled with cutesy, non-descriptive class names. Most schedules focus largely on cardiovascular training, and the music often runs the risk of sounding like it was recorded in a night club during spring break.

Let's look at the facts:

- ? Members would rather work out with other people than alone, yet only 13 percent of your facility's members are using the group exercise program.
- ? A group exercise room serving 35 members is more cost-effective than running 35 treadmills.
- ? A good group exercise class ensures an effective and safe workout.
- ? New members are more likely to continue using their membership if they are integrated into a group program.
- ? Members are more likely to renew if they are using their membership on a regular basis.

So, how do you make the most out of the valuable space and energy you are dedicating to group fitness? You may need to re-evaluate your schedule and take control of the content taught in each class.

Standardizing the member experience

Think of your group fitness schedule as a menu — a greasy fast food restaurant menu. Why do people eat fast food? People eat fast food because it's physically and mentally easy, and they always know what they are going to get. They know what they are going to pay, and they know what the food will taste like. There is no guessing involved.

This is where the fast food industry can teach the fitness industry something about people. It has learned that people want a sure thing. It has standardized everything about the customer

experience, from the architecture and color scheme of the restaurant to the recipes and food preparation. It has standardized to ensure that the customer experience is the same every time. You can do this with group fitness, too.

There are three major ways to standardize the participant experience: simplified scheduling, standard class outlines and instructor team-building.

Simplified scheduling

Currently, group fitness directors program their schedule according to the suggestion box and surveys. I like to call this "the squeaky wheel" method (the squeaky wheel gets the grease). The result is a disjointed schedule that looks, to a newbie, like it is written in Greek. "The squeaky wheel" method of programming is based on flawed data. The survey results are skewed. The poll and/or comments in the box only takes into account the opinions of the most verbal regular participants. What about the 90 percent of participants who don't leave comments in the box? What about the 87 percent of your facility's members who are not attending *any* classes?

A group fitness schedule should have three to five major types of classes in it. There should be Step and, if there is interest, hi/lo and dance-based cardio. There should also be a weightlifting class that is strength-based, with participants holding weights the majority of the time. Finally, there should be a "challenge" format: an athletic drill or bootcamp-type class.

These major class formats should take up 75 percent of the slots on your schedule. After that, in non-prime-time slots or in secondary studios, there should be specialty classes such as belly dancing, Pilates, yoga, kickboxing, etc.

Each time slot should offer variety throughout the week. For example, at 9:15 a.m. on Monday there could be Step, Tuesday is Weights, Wednesday is Hi/Lo, Thursday is Weights and Friday is Athletics. It's good to offer weights on either Monday-Wednesday-Friday or Tuesday-Thursday, since participants need a day between sessions to recover.

When trying to fit every type of class into your schedule, avoid hybrid classes, unless you know that they are a success at your facility. Hybrid classes are the classic "squeaky wheel" pacifiers. Two separate participants leave comments in the box — one wants Step on Tuesday at 5:30 p.m., and the other wants Pilates on Tuesday at the same time. So, you decide to make a hybrid: 30 minutes of Step followed by 30 minutes of Pilates. You then give it a cute name, like "StePilates," and everyone's happy, right? The problem is that this hybrid came about because someone asked for a Step class and someone else asked for Pilates class. No one has gotten what they wanted.

Trust yourself and use your best judgment. Offer what is going to pull in the highest numbers in that time slot. When the schedule is simplified, participants will find it easier to follow and easier to find a class that they want to take.

Standard class outlines

Fast food restaurants have set, written standards for each food item they prepare. They have documents, diagrams and tools to ensure that each burger has the right amount of each element. Group classes need to be more like a quarter pounder with cheese.

This isn't as hard as you think. A one-hour class can be broken down into 11 songs of about four to five minutes each. The first five minutes of every class is the warm-up. In Step, participants do this with low-impact Step moves. In strength class, they do this with medium weights and range-of-motion activities.

Next, give each song an objective. What do you want to achieve during this segment of the class? The objective will then dictate what kind of standard movement is used for each five-

minute increment. Write an outline for each class format on your schedule. Meet with each instructor and give them the outline for each format they teach.

A word of warning: Instructors are a unique group, and they can be divas. This makes dealing with them potentially difficult. The better and more experienced your instructors are, the more resistant they will be to you handing them an outline to follow for each class format. But that's your role. Time will show that this is what builds the program. So, this is what you must do.

Instructor team-building

Traditionally, instructors get their certification from some major certifying agency, then they approach a facility to inquire about teaching. Instructors are chosen based on a single audition and scheduled based on availability and member feedback. After they are hired, the group fitness director may or may not evaluate instructors once a year.

Since your participants like to know what they are getting out of a class ahead of time, it is logical that they would follow a certain instructor. He or she does things in a similar manner for each class. Members know what to expect, and they know what their return on their one-hour investment will be. Team-building will ensure that all of your instructors are on the same page.

Set aside four Saturday mornings a year for hands-on team-building. Make up new material for your standardized outlines as a team. Have an outside company or certification agency offer a workshop onsite. Have instructors attend workshops throughout the year, and let them teach what they learned to each other. Let them find out that they can trust and respect each other.

Bringing those numbers up

Your job is to build a successful program that serves the most members, and makes money for your facility. Remember, you are building a program that appeals not only to your participants, but to people outside of the current participant base. The approach offered here can bring your numbers up steadily.



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