



# Six-pack or back fix?

**Today, apart from wanting to pound the hours away on a treadmill, clients also join to fix back problems or to seek nutritional advice.**

Thanks to recent European developments, the objectives of the fitness industry have been repositioned and diversified significantly. Fitness centres are starting to be driven by lifestyle and emotional experiences rather than just on the type of cross trainer they offer. What should the fitness centre of today focus on if it wants to cater for its clients? Jörg Hidding from Aktiv Consult explains in this exclusive bodyLIFE UK interview.

Hidding comes straight to the point when it comes to the future of the health and fitness industry: it needs to develop faster, it needs to deliver the results it promises, and it needs to address customer retention and focus on long-term client relationships. It needs to ensure a clear position in the market. Above all, it needs to address the customer experience as a whole, rather than rely on the latest equipment for its reputation.

#### What has been the major shift in focus within the industry of late?

The industry's focus on manufacturers, suppliers, institutional money-making companies and types of equipment has been shifting. What is now becoming equally important is attention to the needs of individual customers, their preferences, and their habits. As an industry we have to deliver a good-quality service.

Increasingly, to do this, fitness operators have to offer not only a standard product, but also target different age and consumer groups, and invest in highly trained staff with know-how in areas other than fitness.

In addition, they need to not think purely in terms of target groups, but also of lifestyle groups; which groups they want to attract and how. Yes, fitness operators need to think about target groups, but they also need to consider different lifestyle groups. Does the operator really know its clients? Which classes do they take, do they wear a Rolex, do they drink red or white wine? This will determine the company's future success.

#### So, as business is now increasingly becoming all about people's emotional needs, long-term client relationships and customer knowledge, do these changes need to be reflected in today's fitness industry's market positioning?

Yes. In fact, the operator with a clear position on this, whose customers know exactly what it offers, should have a higher chance of success.

Members are increasingly looking for an experience in the gym – not just a workout. Comparing the health and fitness to the hotel and restaurant industry, a fitness operator could position itself as a four-star club, a Subway, a MacDonald's, an Asian or specialty restaurant. Clients need to be made aware of the differences between their gym and another down the road. They may have the same equipment, but what kind of experience do your clients have at your gym?

The middle market particularly has to consider what it is, what its position in the market is, and who its clients are – both now and in the future. Fitness operators who get stuck in the middle, neither premium nor discount, are in trouble. Why should members choose them, and why should they stay? They can get the same product at a discount club, or for good service they can go to a Virgin Active health club. Even if customers haven't seen your logo, they should still be able to recognise the company and what it offers. A lot more operators are considering this now, and investments need to be made.

#### Which developments have caused this repositioning of the fitness industry?

First, we have an ageing society, and the club of the future realises it can help deliver results for that ageing population. I believe that in the USA, something like more than 25% of fitness club members are over 55. But in the UK, Germany, France and Italy, fitness is still a product for young people. However, the fitness industry's focus on young customers will soon become a thing of the past.

Successful employers will also play a role, as they will want to keep their ageing workforce healthy, fit and cared for – with the help of the fitness centre. As a fitness operator you can offer a six-pack in three months, but is a baby boomer going to care about that? No: he or she has back pain, and they want to get in and out of their car without restriction. OK, you cannot change this in four weeks; but once it has been achieved, you will



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keep the client. He has become a fan; you have solved a serious problem for him.

Which brings me to another important development; today's customer doesn't just want to be a 'customer' anymore; he or she wants to be a fan of a club. The fitness industry needs to be sexier, and more prepared for this. Look at Apple. This company doesn't have clients, or customers, it has fans. People like Apple because, for them, it's the best thing, it's emotional, it's brilliant. They are Apple's fans. This fan-worship approach is a European phenomenon – including the UK – and will play a large role in the fitness industry.

Another large development, of course, has been the budget market. Increasingly, customers are looking to save money, and this will prompt one of the most dramatic changes to the industry. The discount market is booming in Germany, for instance, and those business models are now making their way into the UK.

#### What other aims, aside from fitness, might clients want to achieve with the help of a fitness centre?

Clients may join a club to lose weight and, therefore, expect nutritional support with their workout or seek nutritional advice as part of an overall strategy to get healthy with the help of the gym. The issue of nutrition is





very complicated, and goes beyond Hollywood and celebrity style diets and weight loss. The health operator of the future has the expertise in health and nutrition, where great opportunities lie.

Another major development in the health and fitness industry that is happening now in Europe is about delivering training and workout results that are measurable. Everyone knows about the performance of their car, but often, they have no idea about their own performance. This will change. More and more, the health-conscious client wants to increase self-awareness of his or her health and see tangible results.

#### **What is the largest development that will change the future of fitness?**

Well, one of the most significant key European development or megatrends is, of course, medical fitness, and co-operation between clinics and fitness. Medical fitness has a clinical

background, with doctors and medical professionals working together with fitness operators and offering different types of equipment. The quality of their service and know-how is very high, as is true of their long-term approaches.

### **Client fan-worship is a European phenomenon**

97% of health-risk factors can be controlled by individuals themselves – by sleeping enough and eating well, doing some training or exercise, and lowering or cutting out stress in their lives. So many studies are showing the impact these factors have on our health. In the future, people will want regular health MOTs, just as they do now for their cars.

Health checks are now also becoming normal practice for blue-chip managers, as they are offered by their compa-

nies. A manager who is ill can become very expensive. Corporate health will be growing in the next five to 10 years – not only in fitness training, but also in nutrition and so on.

As a joint venture, Nuffield Health Fitness & Wellbeing centres\* have the best practice model that I have seen in the UK. They deliver a 360-degree health product: fitness facilities, health services, expert staff, prevention, training, diagnostics, medication and rehabilitation. For me, it's a close loop; a very smart business model indeed. I see it as a clear indicator of how the health and fitness industry is finally coming together.

*\* Since becoming pioneers in medical health by cooperating with independent private care facilities; formerly called Cannons health centres are now called Nuffield Health Fitness & Wellbeing' centres- Ed. Source: [www.cannons.co.uk](http://www.cannons.co.uk) and [www.nuffieldhealth.com](http://www.nuffieldhealth.com)*