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Modern Day *Design*

by Christopher Meyers

Premier at Sawmill in Columbus, Ohio embodies innovating program ideas and spatial concepts to appeal to its members. Photo by: Fienkenopf Studios

No longer are the days when all it took to open and operate a health club was an open space with a few free weights and treadmills. Now, we live in an ever-changing and evolving society that is much more sophisticated and high-tech. This has forced health clubs to either change, or to go out of business. Athletic clubs of today face a constant challenge to stay up-to-date and on the cutting-edge of design, technology, equipment and services – so they can meet the needs and desires of their current members *and* attract new members.

Members, or potential members, of most athletic clubs are quite a discerning group. They want their club to be current, and (with the competitive nature of most clubs) they know they can always find something different, and maybe even better, at the other club up the street. To remain competitive, clubs must always offer a consistent base of services as well as “the next best thing.”

Certain services are timeless and don’t evolve or seem to change. In a recent survey of existing members at numerous local clubs,

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it was clear that the number one reason for retaining membership was: members had a comfortable feeling while attending their club. The survey also showed that the "comfortable feeling" was a result of: great service by staff; attractive architectural space, and cleanliness. The survey's second most important factor in retaining membership was: members felt that their club was current in its class offerings with desirable programs, and that the equipment and technology were state-of-the-art. Design components of modern athletic clubs should be developed with the approach of promoting that "sense of comfort" mentioned in the survey.

Space

Participating in an athletic club is not only an effort to develop one's personal health and wellness; it is also a social experience. Creating visually dynamic, flexible space within your club is the key to providing a social, comfortable and energizing atmosphere as part of the fitness experience. Open spaces can visually connect various areas of the club to strengthen the social component. (A workout routine, or time spent on a piece of cardio equipment, is simply more enjoyable with a variety of things to observe.)

Furthermore, with the constant evolution of fitness trends, flexibility of space is crucial to a club's ability to adapt to the needs and desires of the latest rage.

- **Group Space:** Offering a variety of group exercise spaces allows a club to provide for everything from conventional group aerobic programs to highly specialized group exercise activities. When planning a group exercise space, consider offering flexibility in wall configurations to make large classes feel comfortable, and small classes feel intimate and personal, with little labor in



Premier at Sawmill Bistro | Photo by: Fienkenopf Studios

modifying the space. There are several other components which are necessary for a club to adapt to the variety of group exercise activities. For example, the ability to adjust lighting, temperature and audio can truly enhance the experience of the session.

- **Kids Space:** Providing creative and engaging spaces for children of all ages is important to attracting young families and retaining their memberships for years to come. Offer dedicated spaces for



Front desk area: Premier at Sawmill in Columbus, Ohio
Photo by: Fienkenopf Studios

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different age groups with appropriate activities to keep children happy and excited to come to your club. (Offer moms and dads a welcome break and relaxing experience.) The important component of the kids' experience is that it is not simply a room with videos or video games, but an active and energetic space to promote health and physical fitness. Plus, utilizing space as a kids' gym with age-appropriate fitness equipment is a wonderful way to develop the club members of the future.

Amenities

Today, many club members are basing their club selections on supplemental amenities rather than just fitness components. (After all, just about every club has strength training and cardio.) Sometimes, it's the other, extra things that are valuable to members, or that are critical for those deciding to join.

Supplemental amenities can be very unique and creative – the more creative, the better. Many amenities would not cost any more to offer, but would provide an additional source of club revenue. Consider the following ideas for your club:

- Popular food services, such as grab-and-go food, pre-packaged meals, protein shakes, smoothies, juices and supplements, which require very little preparation space and staff
- Spa services, including manicures, pedicures, facials and massages
- A small business center with news and business media, and Internet connections for quick emails or business calls
- A conference center to provide a meeting space for members, and show-off your club to potential new members

- Laundry and dry cleaning services through a partnership with a local, outside source
- Automotive services, such as car washing, detailing or oil changes, provided by an outside service
- Services for members' pets with a local dog groomer or veterinarian (while a member spends time at your club).

And, remember, there are lots of outside vendors who are very anxious to tap-in to your club's membership base to gain more business. Through partnerships with those outside vendors, your club can provide more for your members to demonstrate the level of service you provide, and to show your interest in making your members' lives easier and more enjoyable.

The modern athletic club simply must offer innovative program and service options and amenities to keep up with the needs of members. The planning and design of a great club will always be adaptable to "re-purposing" in order to accommodate changes and advancements in the industry. The key is to create a flexible environment for fitness, and to enhance the experience of your club members by maintaining a vibrant and energetic architectural space. **CS**

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