

# Fit for your clients?

*Installing or refurbishing a fitness suite is a complex process, particularly if you need to balance the books and ensure ongoing usage. So, where do you start?*

BY WARREN CLARK

Though the overall fitness boom is showing signs of slowing, including a fitness suite in your sports facility is pretty much a necessity, rather than a luxury. Where once a few free weights in a converted broom cupboard might have been enough, customers now expect a fully kitted out room, complete with all the very latest machinery, plus music, appropriate lighting and staff on hand to give them help. As such, the installation of a fitness suite is not something to be undertaken lightly.

Alliance Leisure Services works in public/private partnership with local authorities to develop profitable sports facilities. Operations director Sarah Watts advises that there are numerous considerations to bear in mind at the planning stage of a project: 'A joined-up approach to the overall design of the facility is essential if the fitness element is to integrate with the rest of the building. Basic practicalities require consideration to details such as proximity to changing facilities. Air handling (cooling or conditioning), number and placement of electric points and other such things that are difficult to alter once the site is operational need to be part of the initial design and building. If these are right from the outset they will not be obvious to customers, but you can guarantee they will be if they are wrong – operational efficiency is a key element of the design process.'

Chris Johnson, managing director at Pulse Fitness, says location of the gym is key: 'If installing a facility for the first time, think about where the gym can go. Are there redundant or underused areas of the centre? This might be a squash court, a cafeteria or even an old snooker room. Similarly, if the time has come for refurbishment, is the current location of the gym the best available? For most sport and leisure centres, the fitness suite will be the biggest income generator, so it needs to be located in a prime position. It's also important that the area you set aside is suitably large – we've

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moved on from the cubby hole with its multi-gym and an exercise bike.'

With location settled, plans can turn to atmosphere. 'This incorporates numerous factors,' says Sarah Watts, 'starting with visual appeal, colour, lighting, furniture, and the aesthetics of the equipment itself and its layout. More equipment may service more customers but it is important to get the right balance so the gym does not look too "cluttered". It is also important to leave sufficient room for movement between machines. This is a health and safety consideration too, as is allowing the required space by fire exits. Wherever possible layout should incorporate an element of flexibility to enable changes to be made. There is also the Disability Discrimination Act to consider, which means that your equipment as well as your building and staff need to be accessible to all users.'

'Finally, setting up service agreements incorporating a preventative maintenance programme helps to minimise downtime... another factor in maintaining customer satisfaction.'

Some of the best advice available comes from the manufacturers of fitness equipment, each of whom is now placing greater importance on customer service – both pre- and post-sales – and that means a better deal for the facility manager. Although this approach is designed to sell you more equipment, the advice available can be



extremely useful.

Paul Shinnors, UK sales director at Technogym, recommends getting in contact with the manufacturers as early as possible. 'Use manufacturers as consultants,' he says. 'Many will be able to do much more than simply sell you equipment. They will be aware of up to date legislation, such as the Disability Discrimination Act, and will also be able to talk to you in detail about your business plan – i.e. identifying your target market, pricing structure (monthly, pay and play etc).'

Sue Dunn, marketing manager at Oxide UK, sympathises with the plight of local authority sport and leisure centres when it comes to attracting clientele. 'The problem that most sport and leisure centres face in trying to compete with private sector health clubs, and in particular the chains, are the negative connotations that people have of public sport and leisure centres. People prefer a club atmosphere with a strong identity that engenders a sense of belonging. By using appropriate branding techniques in terms of design, style and choice of equipment this can be



Once your fitness equipment has been chosen, take care to ensure there is enough space around each piece of kit to ease access and meet health and safety regulations. *Picture courtesy of Powersport.*

successfully created under a separate theme within a multi-use sport and leisure centre.'

Chris Johnson agrees that local authority centres face a challenge, but it is one that can be met: 'Local authority sports centres can compete with private fitness clubs. Though there is a view held by some that equates council-owned facilities with council houses, there is definitely a middle ground customer who would be equally happy going to a private fitness club as they could to a council-owned facility. For this reason, sport and leisure centres need to get that private club feel to any fitness facility they install, while still satisfying their social agenda with discounts and so on.'

Another matter for contention is that many multi-purpose sport and leisure centres are seen as family-friendly facilities, and yet a gym is almost always an adult domain. 'Customers like zones that vary in atmosphere and décor, and the



Gyms need a good balance of strength and cardio equipment. *Picture courtesy of Oxide.*

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## 'The trick to retention is to maintain the interest and motivation of your members over the long term'

fitness suite will normally be one of the core activities for adults in the facility,' continues Sue Dunn. 'The fitness suite should be an adults only oasis where they can relax and focus on themselves.'

One manufacturer which does much more than deliver you the kit and then walk away is Life Fitness, which has developed Ready Steady Go, a scheme to help facilities focus attention on the details of the exercise environment that affect member retention and the member's club experience. Arron Williams, academy manager at Life Fitness, is leading the initiative: 'A lot of clubs are simply designed to create a good first impression. The problem is that the novelty of this impression soon wears off. Looking at the same thing, the same way every time becomes a boring and limiting experience. The trick to retention is to maintain the interest and motivation of your members over the long term. All of which necessitates that clubs consider the story they want to tell, and then make sure the staff and facilities provide evidence of that story day in, day out.'

The Ready Steady Go scheme draws a lot of its influence, bizarrely, from the retail sector. 'We looked at how successful retail outlets are designed and laid out to influence behaviour,' continues Arron. 'Whenever you go to a supermarket, there is something about the layout which always makes you end up buying much more than you went in for. We wanted to translate some of these retail strategies into the gym environment to make it a much more rewarding and stimulating experience for the end user over the long term.'

'The idea is to engineer a series of experiences within the club environment that will stand the test of time. A healthy club should lift the spirit, there ought to be a "feel-good" factor to a club's design that makes both staff and members want to come back again and again. To achieve this we recommend that clients think very carefully about what type of healthy environment they want to create – and this goes way beyond simply décor, colour, lighting, club layout, changing rooms, and exercise equipment. We focus attention on the simple fact that people need reasons to go back and have incorporated some of those reasons into club design and the layout of the exercise environment. From the exterior to the interior every detail affects the experience.'

A major consideration, of course, is your choice of equipment to fill the gym. 'The choice of equipment is vital in attracting customers,' says



The composition of equipment in your fitness suite will depend largely on your proposed clientele. The more diverse your customer base, the more varied your equipment needs to be. Picture courtesy of Oxide UK.

Sue Dunn of Life Fitness. 'Not only does it have to work and perform well, it has to act as a marketing tool to attract customers to the facility. A range of equipment with a strong visual dynamic will help create a separate and strong brand identity that is often lacking from sport and leisure centre fitness facilities. Having decided on your brand, you need to choose the right mix of equipment to appeal to your clients. Basically a fitness suite needs a cardiovascular area, strength equipment zone, stretching and floor work area, and maybe a free weights area (unless this is housed elsewhere).'

Andrew Stevenson, sales and marketing director at Powersport, adds: 'The choice of equipment will be governed by current trends. Some 10 years ago, you would find around 70 per cent resistance/strength machinery versus 30 per cent cardiovascular. More recently, the exact opposite has been true, though right now we are seeing the pendulum swing once again, perhaps towards a more equal breakdown.'

As well as a suitable mix of products, the equipment must be of a sufficient standard and quality. 'Providers must specify in accordance with statutory requirements,' continues Stevenson. 'The two most important areas are in equipment and access for those with disabilities. In the case of the former, fitness equipment is governed by a strict set of EU regulations, covering operation, usage and so on. Any choice of equipment should be made with the assurance that it meets these standards. On the second point, the Disability Discrimination Act comes into force next year, and this necessitates a level of accessibility for those with disabilities. This will be law, and therefore cannot be ignored.'

### Clean up

Keeping fitness equipment clean is just as important as ensuring it is used and maintained properly. Among the products available for just this purpose is BioLab's PoolWise Hygiene range. Maintenance manager at LA Fitness in Stevenage Jim McGarry uses PoolWise AllClean, a general purpose detergent/disinfectant, for cleaning walls, floors, locker rooms, shower areas and leisure equipment. Its enhanced biocidal and cleaning action is designed to control micro-organisms that can pose a health risk if not checked.

'We use AllClean every day, on the poolside and in the shower area. Our cleaners are very happy with it and it certainly does an excellent job,' concludes McGarry.

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The equipment needs to act as a marketing tool, attracting new clients. Picture courtesy of Technogym.

How you fund the fitness suite is also key, and it's not just a case of working out how much it will all cost in capital terms and then getting out the begging bowl. Paul Shinnars advises: 'A recent change in law means that manufacturers can offer customers a further funding option in the form of leasing equipment. Leasing is a much cheaper alternative than capital outlay in the short term, and can make much more sense to the money men on committees and boards of trustees.'

Beyond the basics, the exact choice of your equipment will depend on the detail of your business plan and, just as important, what staffing you have available. 'Where a full service is being provided the mix of equipment can be more complex,' says Sue Dunn. 'If it isn't then keep it simple.'

Andrew Stevenson suggests thinking about the overall make-up of your potential demographic: 'Consider broader social inclusion objectives, such as catering for different age groups. There is a

move to encourage younger people under the age of 16 to become more active and steer them away from the couch potato culture. At the other end of the scale is the over-50 market. With 40 per cent of the population set to be aged 50 or over by the year 2010, this market will represent a significant proportion of your potential custom, so the equipment mix needs to reflect this.'

Another consideration for your choice of equipment is whether it is IT-friendly. Paul Shinnars says: 'IT is an important element of modern fitness equipment, so choose a manufacturer who recognises this. The Government is encouraging local authorities to become e-enabled in as many facets of their operation as possible. In the fitness industry, some manufacturers can train staff via the Internet, carry out diagnostics and servicing online and help devise programmes for each product.'

If you've settled on a satisfying product mix, there is also the layout to think about. 'Ensure that

### A junior gym?

Encouraging those under-18 to indulge in gym-based fitness work is a controversial topic for some, but private club chain Fitness First has made a commitment to youth fitness. With the help of youth fitness specialist Kidco Fitness, the chain will be installing SHOKK gyms throughout its sites.

Andy King, north west regional manager at Fitness First, explains: 'By opening a SHOKK gym we're hoping to expand our appeal to a broader range of members and invest in the future of Fitness First. Kidco Fitness is the perfect partner to help us expand in this sector, not only do they supply equipment designed using the very latest research, they also have an intelligent and proven approach to convincing young people to adopt a healthier lifestyle. We will also be working with Kidco on effective marketing to young people.'

One of the main attractions of the gym system to Fitness First is the use of specially designed Functionality Lifting Technology (FLT), which is purpose built for the growing bodies of young people. Rather than using miniature versions of adult equipment, the entire system is ergonomically designed using the most recent international anthropomorphological measurements and standards.

Fitness First gym instructors will undertake the Sprito ratified Youth Strength Training modules from Kidco Fitness before working in the gym. This special training will enable them to be entered on to the register of recognised exercise professionals at various levels dependent on ability.



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the equipment is not situated too close together,’ warns Sue Dunn. ‘There need to be clearly defined walkways through the gym. The use of contrasting flooring can be useful here. It is helpful to test your gym at full capacity prior to opening to ensure that there is sufficient leg and elbow room around the equipment, and that the use of a particular piece doesn’t restrict usage on neighbouring equipment. It is also worth bearing in mind that an over reliance on mirrors can be quite distracting and disorientating and can pose a health and safety risk.’

With everything in place and your wonderful new gym set to open, don’t forget to tell people about it. ‘Don’t neglect the sales and marketing aspect, once the fitness suite is up and running,’ says Chris Johnson. ‘As a leisure centre, the gym will be just one of a range of sports opportunities you can offer, many of which won’t feature at the private fitness club down the road. If you are able to make a point of this in your marketing materials – and the fact that your fees are probably going to be a lot cheaper than the private club – you should attract a fair chunk of that market in your direction.’ ●

**Inclusive Fitness Initiative (IFI)**

Access for disabled people does not stop at getting into the facility; it is essential that service providers ensure that the activities that they offer are also inclusive. Fitness suites are an excellent way of addressing the inclusion agenda in the purest sense, with disabled people using the same equipment, at the same time, in the same way as non-disabled people.

The IFI has gone some way to supporting equipment suppliers to provide inclusive fitness equipment, and now boasts 21 accredited suppliers who cumulatively have had 81 pieces of equipment accredited as inclusive. The inclusive list of equipment has been compiled following rigorous testing by disabled and non-disabled people and a long-term commitment from equipment suppliers to inclusion.

So what makes a piece of fitness equipment inclusive? At this stage there is no definitive answer. Equipment suppliers are working towards inclusion in a variety of ways, contrasting colours on adjusters, tactile overlays for cardiovascular equipment and swing away seats to allow access for wheelchair users to name just a few of the developments that have taken place to allow access for disabled people.

The IFI’s ambition, however, is that this process will become much more standardised and that new equipment will incorporate inclusive features from the outset rather than retrospectively. What is even more encouraging is the fact that many of the equipment suppliers share this

vision. The IFI has facilitated a unique partnership among 11 equipment suppliers, Sport England, the English Federation of Disability Sport, Montgomery Leisure Services (the current project management agency for the IFI) and Sheffield Hallam University. This partnership has resulted in the appointment of a PhD researcher investigating inclusive equipment design. It is hoped that with the completion of the research, the findings will impact upon the European Standard for the production of fitness equipment.

Equipment design is just one element that facility providers must consider in order to achieve inclusion. There is a range of issues that must be considered throughout the fitness suite from the physical layout of equipment to the accessibility of information etc. The IFI has urged centres to conduct a review of their provision from access to training to the way in which they are promoted ensuring that inclusion is addressed in a holistic sense. Doing this, fitness facilities can reap the rewards from the sound business case which underlines the importance of inclusion.

- **For more information on the IFI and to find out more about the accredited list of fitness equipment please call 0114 257 2060 or visit [www.inclusivefitness.org](http://www.inclusivefitness.org)**
- **Montgomery Leisure Services offers inclusive fitness consultancy services, Fit For Inclusion, for further information please call 0114 257 2062**

