



**Our team of experts
chart a path forward
for the industry**

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**FEARLESS
PREDICTIONS
FOR THE FUTURE
OF FITNESS**

By Fred Hoffman

With transformation on the minds of those at IHRSA 2022, CBI is looking to industry prognosticators, disruptors, and innovators to understand what fitness professionals and health clubs must prepare for in the coming months.

Technology, member recruitment and retention, and the state of the current workforce were the subjects *du jour*, as well as how businesses can plan for shifting trends and continued market disruptions.

Although the fitness industry is very diverse and vast, there was a consensus that it needs to make some fundamental changes, but that opportunities for growth and development abound. Here's what we learned.



Consumers Will Demand Hybrid Options and Greater Service

As the industry sees a gradual return to in-person workouts, clubs continue to struggle to get members back into facilities and are finding it even more difficult to attract new members even though the Covid-19 pandemic highlights a need for increased physical activity. How do club operators create the right incentives to get people to return to gyms?

“What consumers wanted and were willing to pay for has changed and will continue to change because of the pandemic,” observes Debbie Bellenger, a corporate wellness expert and CEO of Body by Definition, based in Greenville, South Carolina.

“The key to getting people back in clubs is to alter the model and mindset that service in a fitness club starts with exercise. Service actually begins with consumer choice and voice. The user experience must be barrier-free, timely, comfortable, and relational, and the programs that clubs offer must have what the members need, when they need it,” she insists.

While for most operators, hybrid options began as a quick fix, most of our experts agree that they will continue to be the norm and will help to retain members and encourage them to return to in-person workouts.

Pete Moore, the founder, managing partner, and chief dream architect at Integrity Square located in Manhattan Beach, California, and New York City, believes that hybridization is the new normal.

“If you are providing fitness programming in your five-mile radius, you must own it—in club, outside, and online,” he insists.

Bellenger echoes that sentiment. “Remain hybrid so members can consume at their pace and in their own space.”

“Hybrid fitness is here to stay, but most gym operators do not have the resources to produce content that would represent their brands in a positive way,” observes Al Noshirvani, the CEO of Fitness Club Management and managing partner at Integrity Square. “So operators should be looking to companies who produce high-quality content, deliver top-notch experience, and enable monetization.”



Bellenger



Moore



Noshirvani



Messaging Will Change to Decrease “Gymtimidation”

Reaching the 80% of the population who have never stepped foot inside a club or studio continues to be a challenge and even more so now, in these uncertain times.

“The question remains, why is 80% of the population not engaged in regular physical activity?” Bellenger points out. She acknowledges that fitness clubs have typically not been well-positioned with their business models to accommodate those people who often see a club membership as a luxury and not a necessity.

“Reaching them means having outreach, pricing, and reimbursement models, as well as programming to accommodate their needs.”

Moore believes that there has never been a greater opportunity than right now for the HALO (Health, Active Lifestyle, and Outdoors) sector to reach the 80%. →

5 Fearless Predictions for the Future of Fitness

“The general public knows they need to exercise in some way, shape, or form,” he says. “But the only way that will happen is if we change our messaging in a way that’s far more approachable than it ever has been, with a focus on results and fun!”

The pandemic has prompted consumers to prioritize their health, with 50% focusing more on their wellbeing, according to the *2021 Global Fitness Report*, observes Sean Turner, the CEO of Les Mills US, based in Chicago, Illinois. “The next few years represent a golden opportunity for clubs to engage new audiences and grow their membership,” he believes.

Turner also notes that the pandemic spawned a new generation of rookie fitness fans who are now deciding what comes next, with 27% of regular exercisers describing themselves as absolute beginners.

“Opportunities abound for operators who can appeal to these groups, ensure that they feel welcome, and understand both the unique barriers to exercise that they face and what they want from a fitness experience,” he says.

Sunil Rajasekar, president and chief technology officer at Mindbody, based in San Luis Obispo, California, shared that the findings from the annual *Mindbody Wellness Index: Fitness Report* survey showed an increase in “gymtimidation,” with 19% of the general U.S. population too intimidated to go into a gym or studio. This jumped to 38% when looking at Gen Z women.

“To overcome this situation, businesses must make consumers feel welcomed and comfortable while trying out their studios, and offer services tailored to beginners or those getting back into their routine,” he suggests.

Noshirvani concurs. “The reality is that we must create an environment where people don’t feel overwhelmed, and are onboarded in a way that makes them feel that they can succeed. Taking a one-size-fits-all approach to fitness will never attract the 80%.”

He suggests creating personas and tailoring onboarding to those personas, and that marketing and messaging should speak to the people you are trying to entice.

“The days of showing chiseled bodies in our marketing need to come to an end,” he concludes.



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Wellness, Nutrition, and Recovery Will Become Major Revenue Streams

Recognizing the need to address the overall health and wellbeing of individuals, our experts share a general feeling that there will be huge growth in the areas of wellness, nutrition, and recovery.

A major finding from the *2022 Mindbody Wellness Index* is that the definition of wellness is changing, providing the fitness industry a great opportunity to build deep connections with consumers.

“Pre-pandemic, the top motivations for working out were weight control and feeling good. We are now seeing a shift to stress reduction and feeling better mentally. It’s time for gyms and studios to become a one-stop shop for wellness,” observes Rajasekar.

“Fitness is one part of the wellness puzzle; nutrition and recovery are two additional pieces that are gaining more attention, and this will only increase,” says Shannon Fable, the owner of SF Resources, based in Boulder, Colorado, and the director of partnerships at Stronger U Nutrition. “If we continue to only provide one-side solutions, exercise programming, for example, we will miss the opportunity to provide the results our members truly want and need.”

Thus, she encourages clubs to invest in health coaches, upskill teams in behavior change, provide continuing education around recovery, and find ways to integrate nutrition guidance and coaching.

Bellenger believes that it is time for the fitness industry to intersect with medicine and form new partnerships to address wellbeing.

“The age of consumerism is about client convenience, with an increased focus on feeling better. The opportunities to diversify revenue streams for immunity health, mental fitness, longevity, recovery training (e.g., yoga, stretching, mobility work, Theragun, etc.), and emotional wellbeing are vast,” she concludes.

“We need to commit ourselves to becoming the trusted source of wellbeing in people’s lives, which means not just embracing exercise, but also nutrition and recovery,” asserts Noshirvani.





The Importance of Technology for Sales and Marketing Will Increase

As technology and digital are no longer “the future”—they are an integral part of our lives—it is critical that operators and professionals keep up with the fast pace of technological growth throughout every aspect of the business of fitness and health.

Like many industry leaders, Rajasekar sees how technology is being used across a broad range of services and products. “From the perspective of programming, sales, and marketing, there is a great opportunity to complement in-person fitness with these technology trends—especially virtual workouts, which are proving to be a valuable extension of a brand,” he observes.

“For years, the fitness industry has equated technology with member management, point of sale, and/or payment processing systems,” says Noshirvani. “With the proliferation of apps, social media, and a desire for clubs to reach outside their four walls, point solutions have become much more prevalent—addressing marketing automation, member engagement, data visualization/reporting, and staff scheduling. These software solutions are invaluable and have clear ROI in both direct and indirect cost.”

And Bellenger is convinced that learning digital skills across all sectors of the fitness industry is essential. “LinkedIn’s economic graph shows that skillsets have changed about 25% since 2015, and that number is expected to double by 2027,” she explains. “Learning the technological skills necessary to stay current is vital for professionals.”



Your Staff and Trainers Will Become More Essential to Your Brand and Success

Because of the disruption to the fitness industry from club closures, a proliferation of online workout options, job insecurity, and fewer individuals interested in pursuing a fitness career, the overall industry is facing a shortage of professionals. Our experts weigh in on how to both attract and retain well-qualified professionals.

“It is the moment for the industry to rise up to a greater level of skill and sophistication,” insists Bellenger. “The levers of incentivization clearly need to be rebooted with better entry level of pay, training and development, increased benefits, and a committed growth plan for advancement in the industry.”

Fable expresses a similar point of view. “Instructors and trainers are looking for job security, more support from the employer, growth opportunities, and guaranteed income. Thinking of new ways to employ and engage fit professionals is a must,” she says.

“We as an industry need to make fitness a career, not a pass-through job,” says Noshirvani. “As part of this effort, we are now offering a \$15 minimum wage, opportunities for advancement, and most importantly, health insurance as well as PTO (paid time off) for our W-2 and hourly staff. These are not things that we have historically done, but it has had an immediate impact on not only employee loyalty, but also morale.”

Les Mills believes in the power of group-X instructors, and Turner says that’s only going to increase in the future.

“We are really focused on helping clubs to attract more instructors and drive engagement to strengthen their current teams,” he says. “As we enter a new industry growth phase, clubs with great instructors are ideally placed to meet the yearning for community and human interaction we’ve all felt during the pandemic. Great people are the only unique selling point that your rivals can’t copy,” he concludes.

Given the current difficulties in recruiting, Moore encourages employers to consider different profiles, such as college athletes. “With their winning mindset and energy, these are ideal rock-star employees for your brand. They wake up every day poised to win, and that type of mentality is contagious.”

Whatever Happens, Stay Nimble

While we can’t predict the future, we can better prepare for it by anticipating the general direction and outlook of current trends, customer behaviors, and societal shifts, all the while remaining agile and receptive to change. As we’ve learned the last few years, you have to be ready for the unexpected. —

— Fred Hoffman, fred@fredhoffman.com



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