

MARKETWATCH

SAMPLE

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Nutrition programs called missed opportunity

BY JENNIFER KEIR, Contributing Editor

An untapped market. The missing link in health club success. A key to better results for members, leading to increased retention.

Sound like music to a club owner's ears?

These are some of the words industry veterans use to describe the potential that nutrition programs hold for fitness clubs today. Yet surprisingly few clubs are joining up, they say, and as a result are missing out on the potential revenue, marketing and retention benefits that nutrition programs can provide.

"I think the market is untapped in a real sense," said Robert Karch, president of nutrition provider Biometrics.

"I'm a huge fan of the health and fitness industry, but I believe we've failed in giving the consumer what they've asked for. We give them exercise, but very few [clubs] give them true weight loss or weight management."

Casey Conrad, an industry consultant and creator of the weight-loss chain Healthy Inspirations, agrees.

"Eighty-seven percent of members join a club citing weight loss or weight management as a primary goal, and yet most clubs don't have a true weight-loss program," she said. "I personally think clubs could get more profit from a weight-loss program than from personal training."

Instead, said Daron Allen, president and chief executive of Visual Fitness Planner, too many clubs watch those dollars go to

the local Weight Watchers.

"A lot of customers see the advertising of eDiets.com or Weight Watchers and say, 'Oh, it's only a dollar a day!'" said Allen. "[Clubs] don't have the marketing nailed down to make it compelling. If they do a really good job of presenting the value, then a majority of members would see it as a great thing."

Why aren't more clubs taking a cue from Weight Watchers' marketing strategies? "I don't think our industry is well-schooled in selling things other than memberships," said Karch.

He believes clubs can't afford not to add a nutrition program. "If [members] don't modify their diets, they will likely not achieve their goals, and they're not going to stay. They'll walk away saying, 'I didn't get what I wanted to get at the health club.'"

A MENU FOR CHANGE

According to Heather Graves, co-owner of online meal planning provider Vitabot, many clubs today find themselves in a nutrition quandary.

"Most clubs can't afford to hire a nutritionist, but they can't give out nutrition advice without a certification," said Graves. "We've had clubs come to us after getting sued over this."

Programs like Vitabot, Biometrics, Visual Fitness Planner and others have sprung up to fill precisely this void, becoming increasingly high-tech in recent years.

Vitabot's online interface con-

ducts an analysis of the member's food choices, giving grades in areas such as fat, calories, protein, carbohydrates, and key vitamins and minerals. Users can see how food substitutions – such as a different salad dressing – can help their grades improve.

Visual Fitness Planner's system creates a 3-D rendering of the person's current body type, allowing them to see in advance how their body will likely change if they are compliant with diet and exercise recommendations.

Though Biometrics has primarily been paper-based throughout its 12 years in business, the company also offers online dietary plans for clubs and members.

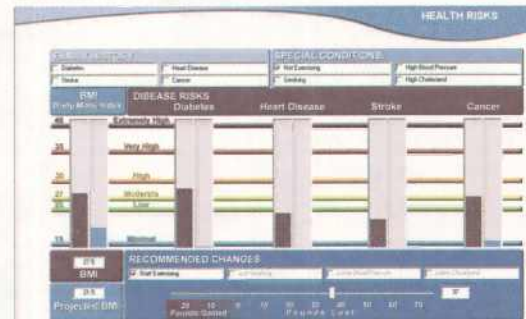
MAKING IT STICK

All are based on accepted dietary guidelines, so there's little debate over whether they work. The challenge is getting members to actually use it, and staying involved in their progress.

"All of the members in our weight loss program get Biometrics free for 10 weeks. It's a great system, but they don't all use what's available to them," said Angel Bobula, community outreach dietician with Akron General Health and Wellness Center in Akron, Ohio.

That's where follow-up becomes crucial, said Bobula.

"A person provides more accountability than a computer program. Just checking in on



Visual Fitness Planner, a Texas company, provides digital images and data that can help clubs persuade new members to sign up for weight-loss programs.

someone helps," she said.

Jerry Saba, co-owner of Slender Xpress, a chain of Northern California personal training studios that offers Vitabot to its members, said clubs "can only do so much for people. They have to step up to the plate." Saba follows up with members on their nutrition program weekly or every other week.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Most nutrition providers charge a monthly fee to clubs that varies based on size, but leave it up to the club whether to charge their members to use it.

Saba frequently gives away

one month of Vitabot access as a membership incentive, but he strongly supports making nutrition programs fee-based.

"There's no accountability in free," said Saba, who said a third of his members use the Vitabot program.

Karch acknowledges that price is the major barrier that clubs will face when offering nutrition programs, but said that "creative packaging will take down those barriers."

"People are willing to pay for health," he added. "If we can get health into the health club industry, the market is huge." **FBN**

In short order, a club changes eating habits

BY JENNIFER KEIRN, Contributing Editor

BRADENTON, Fla. – With a name like Short Cut to Fitness, you'd better believe that co-owner Debbie Champion wants to give her members a shortcut to proper nutrition.

Champion said she accomplishes exactly that by offering all members – at no additional charge – an initial nutrition consultation and access to Vitabot's online meal planning system to complement her Bradenton, Fla., studio's slow-motion style of personal training, which trainers deliver in just one weekly 20-minute session.

"If [a nutrition program] is too time-intensive, they're not going to do it," said Champion. "This is a short cut. This is what we're all about."

Using a system like Vitabot not only offers a shortcut for both club and member, Champion said, but it also lessens members' fear of being judged.

"This program has good credibility with our clients, because it's based on sound data, not just what someone's tell-

Most clients think they eat healthy. But an analysis brings shocking results.

ing them," she said. "It's not us being judgmental about their diet."

Most clients believe they already eat healthy, but after analyzing their diets in the system "they're shocked," Champion said. "They know all the tips and guidelines.

But when they compare what they think they know and what they're applying to their diet, the numbers show differently."

In particular, Champion said, members seeking to lose small amounts of weight

often refuse the program initially, saying "I don't want to go on a diet."

"We have to show them this isn't a diet, it's an education tool for them to use," she said.

With about 50 percent of members "using it in one way or another," Champion said her studio is achieving better results, thereby boosting retention.

"It really empowers the person, giving them the opportunity to make small changes that can make a huge difference in their nutrition," she said.

"We're just the link between an excellent program and our clients." **FBN**