It is just a book: Harry Potter, but, this book seems to be in higher demand every time a new one is released. It is a book that engaged not only our youth, but parents and grandparents as well. It is a book that causes the lines between reality and fiction to be blurred by taking readers on a journey that creatively taps into their imagination and focuses on their experience. Harry Potter has figured out how to attract readers and keep them coming back for more!

Like Harry Potter, society is searching for solutions to attract youth, but this time, it is to encourage them to be more physically active. And, the more important search should be to find a way to keep them coming back for more! In the past, youth-related physical fitness was centered around team sports and persuading children to be more athletic in nature. Unfortunately, reports suggest that the majority of youth are not athletic and they do not enjoy the typical, team sport activities. In fact, 20 million kids register each year for sports and over 70% of these kids quit playing those sports by the age of 13, and they never play them again. According to the National Youth Sport Coaches Association, the number one reason (why they quit) is it stopped being fun. That’s because youth of today are seeking something that is attractive, engaging, and more importantly, FUN!

Our culture has changed, and so has the current generation of young people. Technological changes in society have proven to be an enjoyable and satisfying lifestyle upgrade to which our youth have become accustomed. Televisions, computers, iPods, and video games have taken over the lives of many youth – leaving little room for finding fun in fitness. In fact, 83% of American children, between the ages of eight and 18, have one or more video game consoles, such as: Sony Playstation, Microsoft Xbox, and Nintendo. Unfortunately, these video games have been labeled as sedentary activities and blamed not only for the rising attrition rates in youth fitness, but for the rapidly growing epidemic in obesity levels, too. What do these technology-driven activities provide that our society needs to find in youth fitness activities? Maybe the answer is as simple as: FUN!

Eighty-six percent of adolescents have said that having fun is the single most important element in their lives. Games are fun, and
Exergaming is participating in technology-driven physical activities which involve the user in action or role play in the form of a game. It creates a virtual reality experience requiring members to use their body to participate in the gaming activity. This new segment in the fitness industry is rapidly growing in popularity. Recent studies show that not only does participating in Exergaming activities provide positive benefits related to physical activity, but our youth seem to enjoy it! It seems to be a very easy solution: Bring gaming to our youth in the form of physical activities and they will not only participate, but they will be encouraged to continue to participate.

Exergaming is the alternative our youth have been looking for when the word “fitness” is mentioned. It is the complement to traditional physical activities for which recreation centers, YMCA’s, and fitness clubs have been searching to reduce attrition levels and to make a seamless transition from youth to adult fitness. Exergaming is not only attracting youth to health facilities, but it is keeping them there!

Interestingly enough, the youth segment in the fitness industry is not alone in the rising attrition rates. Making fitness more fun seems to be the common denominator in keeping all populations motivated to exercise. (In fact, the average video gamer is 30 years old.) Although most readily associated with our youth, individuals of all ages (children, adults, and seniors) have been successful in Exergaming activities. An Exergaming environment not only provides participants with the component of physically active, but it also offers a social environment in which all generations seem to be attracted. The energy and excitement that is generated in this type of environment is similar to that of a group fitness class – except there are more smiles and often the sounds of laughter while participants are “Getting their Game On!”

Imagine what your fitness facility would look like if fitness was approached in a way that allowed youth to do what they love – playing video games – while still being motivated to be physically active? So, what does Exergaming look like? Imagine yourself racing against a friend on a snowboard down a snowy mountain dodging trees, jumping cliffs, and riding rails. Or, maybe you’d prefer pedaling fast and racing your dirt bike through a challenging course full of steep ramps, sharp turns, and dangerous off-road adventures. If you like dancing, you can test your dancing skills while scoring points for staying on beat and stepping to the tune of your favorite songs. For a real virtual experience, strap on a magic belt that puts you inside the video game as you move quickly and jump high to keep balls from smashing to the floor, or avoid getting trapped by collecting as many red dots as possible. There are numerous Exergaming systems and products available on the market today. All you need to do is identify which ones are right for you!

The Exergaming experience can be easy to implement in any fitness facility, school, or club. The ideal solution is to dedicate a specific room or space in the facility that represents a “club within a club.” In order to create an environment that consists of a blend of the appropriate Exergaming activities that are specific to each facility’s needs, approximately 800- to 2,400-square-feet of space is recommended. This space will allow for 15 to 50 members, or users, to interact and participate in the Exergaming experience safely. This committed space will also allow for both open play and more structured activities and programs to take place – which makes the Exergaming experience more dynamic and beneficial not only to the participants, but also to the owner of the facility. Another advantage of dedicating a room in a facility to an Exergaming environment is that it has the potential to generate a great deal of revenue. It even provides an opportunity for your facility to offer a unique option for birthday parties. If designed correctly, and if the appropriate programming is implemented, these gaming environments can yield high returns with...
increases in both revenues and member retention.

Four Areas on Which to Focus When Implementing an Exergaming Club

1. **Room Design:** When designing an Exergaming club, plan for proper space allocation with the selected products. The same rules apply for ADA compliance and club safety – taking into consideration a design that will minimize the exposure of the gaming systems and required wiring systems. An additional segment to consider that plays an important role in attracting and retaining members is designing the room with the appropriate lights, graphics and colors that evoke a fun gaming experience.

2. **Equipment Selection:** There are a variety of Exergaming products and systems on the market. Make sure to identify equipment that has been commercialized, reducing the likelihood of wear-and-tear leading to nonfunctional products or frequent problems. A majority of the hardware does not come complete with LCD screens, video game consoles, and the needed games. Make sure the system has everything needed to complete each activity.

3. **Programming Format:** An important element in any Exergaming club is programming. Implementing the appropriate programming and curriculum adds tremendous value to the Exergaming experience. Programming not only provides members with a variety of options when gaming, but it also is a key component in retaining them. The programming format is a new addition to the industry that is proving to produce needed results in the market. This programming is offered, but it is not available with every purchase of Exergaming equipment.

4. **Marketing Programs:** The Exergaming club is a marketing dream! Because video games have become so popular, hosting contests, creating gaming competitions and offering gaming teams provides members with a social environment and a friendly, competitive atmosphere. In order to properly implement marketing programs, it is important to understand gaming and the generation of users. Allowing members to develop ideas and programs, and listening to their ideas, is a great marketing strategy.

Evaluating and implementing these components will largely impact the success of Exergaming offered in any club. When designed correctly, Exergaming will become the solution to attracting and maintaining the current generation of youth in the fitness industry as well as other generations. Just imagine how this new experience will transform your club into a high-energy atmosphere full of excitement, laughter, and FUN…just like Harry Potter!

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