

The real challenge will be to win and occupy the “intangible space” – whatever that may look like in 2015

The Wanless Report describes a future where individual responsibility for health is the norm. This would produce a paradigm shift from the treatment of sickness to the improvement of health and the prevention of illness. Ray Algar of Oxygen Consulting and Linda Hodgson of Future Cat review the role that health clubs may take in this preventative scenario and how they can become more proactive in helping people take personal responsibility for their health and wellbeing.

Why think about 2015 now?

We contend that clubs that strive to genuinely understand the real needs of their members – those that get close and personal – will prosper, while those that rely on buildings and equipment may struggle. The real challenge is to occupy and win the intangible space – atmosphere, staff behaviours and personalised content. So, by exploring trends, the changing world and how this might impact on people’s needs, wants and desires, we can begin to draw up a picture of how health clubs may fit into this new era. Here are four models that draw on a number of these influences:

The “*experiensualist*” health club

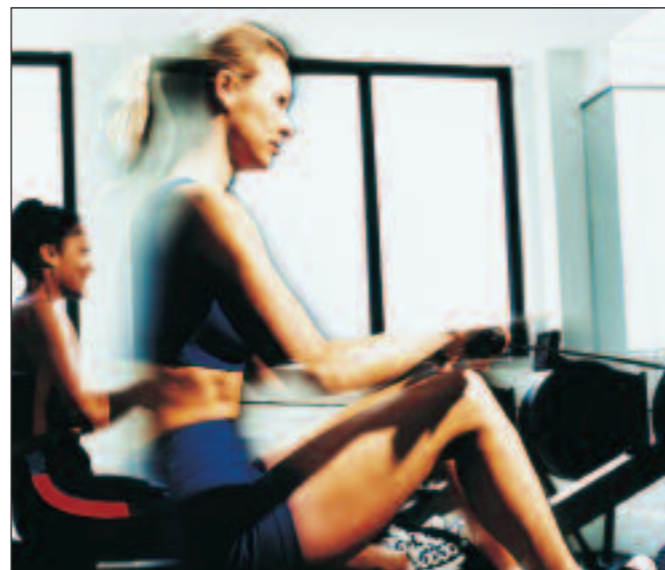
People will continue to congregate in and around cities, losing touch with the rhythms of nature and living more of their daily lives inside. They will spend a lot of time interacting with technology – mobile telephones, computers, televisions and games consoles – which, paradoxically, means they will live in a sensory deprived world.

A recent study conducted on behalf of ICI by Dr Charles Spence from the Department of Experimental Psychology at Oxford University says that we have a basic need for a balanced multi-sensory diet. But the reality is that we are a visually dominated society that is largely deprived of the basic need for taste, touch and smell. Spence said: “Touch is not only essential for our wellbeing, but also our sensory, cognitive, neurological and physical development.”

Fired up by the media, a growing sense of fear also means that people are staying in their homes and monitoring the world from the safety of their armchairs. As we move towards 2015, people will need to be encouraged to venture out to remake social contact.

The “Experiensualist” health club is based on the human need for sensory stimulation and social contact – the desire to be more in tune with our natural rhythms and closer to the natural world.

Experiensualist clubs will create a variety of environments that stimulate the senses, using colour and texture to create different mood spaces. The natural environment will become an integral part of the facility, with areas that allow activities to be undertaken outside the club and closer to nature. Walls and ceilings will be designed to retract and allow the elements in. Staff will become more akin to life coaches than sports technicians, with the skill to manage the emotional as well as the physical needs of their clients. Members will begin to search out those clubs that are able to nurture a deep-rooted relationship rather than just deliver a set of superficial transactions. Complementary treatments and a wide array of sensory experiences to heighten the body’s ability to respond to the natural world will become the norm.



The urban fitness pod

Our everyday lives are increasingly complex. We are overwhelmed with information and therefore suffering from “choice trauma”.



Increasingly, we need brands to help us make the right decisions. We believe that we do not have enough hours in the day to fit everything in, even though we may spend several hours of that day as couch potatoes, eating our take-away or microwave meal and watching TV. We want brands to be flexible in meeting our needs, to be available and open when we need them and to provide us with fast, efficient and personalised service.

The Urban Pod is built around the need for efficient and fast fitness activities, based on personalised programmes that appeal to the Millennial Generation who are technology savvy but with no time to spare. In this model the interaction is very much between person and machine. The machines will provide the personalisation of programming and speed of engagement that people will require.

This is not a place to linger or to engage in social contact – no sun-beds, steam and sauna baths here. It is simply functional and efficient. This is the health club equivalent of the Japanese “capsule hotel”. This is primarily about getting a quick “dose” of fitness and then heading back to the office. Imagine a flexible pod design – sleek, shiny and clean. A robot greets you, employing a biometric or retinal scan to call up your profile. It will know what you did last time, what your programme should be and, through a quick body

diagnosis, it will be able to assess what you need to do, based on your health status that day. The machines will then be automatically configured and ready to take you through your personally designed programme. Your results will be emailed back to your office and copied to your “virtual personal trainer” to form a key part of your weekly video conference.

The personal sustainability centre

Many people recognise that material possessions only bring a fleeting feel-good type of happiness and that in order to live fulfilling lives they need to feel that they are giving something back and making a contribution, no matter how small. As consumers, they are demanding that the businesses they deal with act responsibly, be transparent and make a positive contribution towards society and/or the environment. The growth in fair trade, farmers’ markets and the pressure on global companies to act responsibly towards their stakeholders all reinforce this trend.

The Personal Sustainability model is based on people’s need to reconnect with nature, to treat the whole person and to give something back. It is based on the assumption that people will begin to question the credibility of an energy-guzzling, waste-producing health club. The Personal Sustainability Centre not only treats its members but also the environment with respect. The centre generates all its own energy requirements, harvests rainwater and uses environmentally friendly materials in all areas of its operation. The membership packages are representative of the community, with “means-tested” pricing and “outreach” programmes for those people unable to access the centre through the usual channels. A substantial part of its profits are pledged to sustainable causes. Members are treated holistically and programmes are grounded in the Eastern belief in the need for a balance between Yin and Yang in order to promote overall good health and wellbeing. Staff are older than the normal 20-somethings, drawn from different countries and with more life experience.

The pro-science health club

By 2015, it is predicted that nano-technology will deliver implantable devices that will act as advanced drug delivery systems, while digestible diagnostic tools will continually scan for a person’s predisposition to a wide array of specific illnesses. Global positioning devices embedded in our clothing will allow constant monitoring of our daily physical activity levels. Cosmetic enhancement will become commonplace and no more invasive than our monthly haircut. Liposuction will become more affordable as demand continues to rise. Coupled with “obesity busting” drugs, this could leave health clubs in a vulnerable position.

The Pro-Science model brings the medical community into the health club, to create a seamless transition from diagnosis through to treatment. Staff in this scenario will act as specialist interpreters of the complex health and wellbeing data that will be available. They will advise on the blend of drugs, surgical interventions, exercise and diet required to promote good health. The environment will be professional, comfortably clinical, with a range of activities using science as a basis for understanding the workings of the body and the needs of the individual. This specialist service should provide gravitas to health clubs in terms of being facilitators of good health.

This should also allow clubs to bid for substantial amounts of preventative health-related funding, while forming deep strategic alliances with the insurance industry. This would also help pre-empt hospitals, insurance groups, health related-charities etc moving directly into the health club business.

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