

Putting Pilates on the Schedule

Deciding what programs and equipment your facility should offer.

Considering adding a full-on Pilates program or some new Pilates offerings to your facility's body-mind programming? Are you eyeing mat, apparatus, group sessions, private sessions, specialty classes or all of the above? While this discipline continues its robust popularity with clients, it doesn't mean you can just add it to the schedule and expect it to thrive. Many factors must be weighed in your selection of class type, equipment and the minimum instructor skills you'll accept from staff who will be on the front end of implementation

Dian Ramirez is the fitness director at the San Diego Tennis & Racquet Club, where she also trains clients in the club's Pilates studio. Ramirez says the type of Pilates class a club offers should depend on several factors, including member demographics, floor space, equipment investment, instructor expertise and marketing investment.

Demographics: Know Your Members

Ask yourself who you're trying to attract to your class and why, advises Ramirez. "Effective programming begins with identifying members who have an interest in Pilates and finding out what they would like. Do they like working out alone? In groups? Are they willing to pay extra for group or private equipment-based classes?"

Poll your members and get answers to these questions. They'll provide a solid blueprint for building your programming.

Floor Space: Got Room?

Floor space is especially critical for Pilates because of its body-mind aspect. "A dedicated space is best, if possible," Ramirez says. "Pilates classes require focus and



concentration ideally in a space that is away from noisier activities like spin classes. A quiet location will enhance the environment."

However, a dedicated space isn't feasible for many facilities. "It can be done in a shared space," says Ramirez. "But these clubs will need to think about location and scheduling so they don't conflict with noisier offerings. A shared space will also require equipment that can be stacked or stored on end, for easier storage and portability."

Equipment Investment vs. Mat Classes

For clubs wanting to start a program with minimal equipment investment, mat classes are a great entry point. Mats don't take up much space and are easy to store. Eventually many clubs begin buying equipment, such as reformers, for members wanting something beyond the mat.

It's here that clubs begin to generate non-dues revenue, as equipment classes are most often fee-based.

"It's also important to remember that—although matwork is used as a springboard into fee-based programming—it's *not* necessarily an introductory form of the exercise, and can be extremely challenging," says Ramirez. "Your instructors play a big part in keeping your mat classes fun and safe for all participants."

Reformers have become very popular because they can provide assistance with difficult movements, allowing participants to accomplish exercises they may not be able to perform on a mat.

How much equipment to buy? Most small clubs start off with one or two reformers. A larger facility typically invests in three or four reformers to begin, depending on the amount of space they have.

Hiring Knowledgeable Instructors

To retain and recruit participants, you must have instructors who can keep class sessions fresh and fun. But the extensive repertoire and nuances of Pilates make it paramount to have knowledgeable instructors. It's vital that they be able to modify the exercises to meet the specific needs and challenges of various body types.

In addition, with the continuing rise in overall Pilates participation (the 2007 Topline Report from the Sporting Goods Manufacturing Association reports an increase of 600% in total Pilates participation over the last 6 years), clubs face the dilemma of having a membership that wants Pilates classes, but a shortage of instructors to teach them.

Ramirez points out two options to remedy this situation. "You have a short-term solution, which is hiring an instructor externally, and a long-term solution, which is training your existing staff. Hiring externally can be the faster route, but it's crucial to recruit an instructor who fits in with the club's philosophy and

the dynamic of your membership. A poor hiring choice from this standpoint can lead to dissatisfaction for both members and the instructor.

"The great thing about Pilates is that the exercises can be modified to meet the needs of people with specific needs or interests."

"Conversely, 'growing your own' requires more of an investment in time, but you can count on having instructors who are familiar with your club and its members."

Nico Gonzalez knows this firsthand. As the group fitness manager for the Mercy HealthPlex—a group of three large health and fitness clubs owned by the Mercy Health Partners in the Cincinnati, Ohio, area—Gonzalez first hired externally with disappointing results. "It can work fine, but in this case it didn't. The

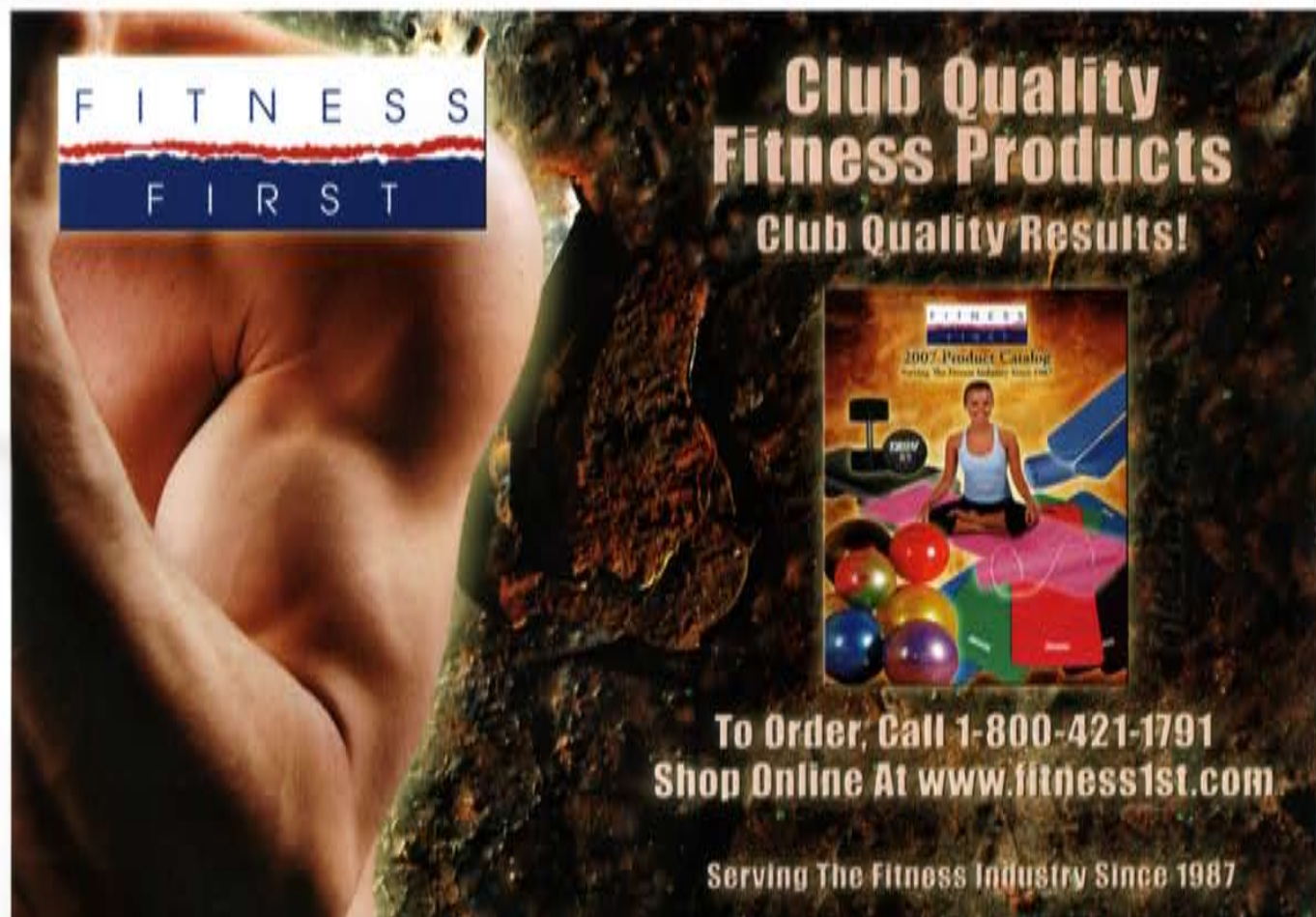
instructors I hired had a different dynamic than what was needed at Mercy."

Gonzalez, a certified instructor through Balanced Body University, then created his own educational program and trained several of Mercy's existing staff. "It was a 90-day program—from basic foundation to integrated training on the reformer," Gonzalez recalled. He also included business-oriented training. "Many instructors just teach their class and leave. That doesn't work in our program. So I included a component on client retention, because getting members in is easy; keeping them is hard."

To facilitate the training component for clubs, several companies now offer education conducted onsite (see sidebar). These trainings can be modular and allow instructors to continue their education as desired.

Group vs. Private Sessions

"In all probability, you're going to find that your members will want both [group and private instruction]," says Ramirez. "Some members want to work out with other people while others want individual



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Market, Market, Market!

No matter what type of classes you offer, they'll fall flat if not properly marketed to existing and potential members. Ramirez and Gonzalez point out a few tips they've used to help get the word out.

New
Classes

Tell Your Members. How does your club market to its members? Through e-mail? Website? Fliers? Newsletters? Make sure detailed information on your program is made available in every possible format. Invite members to a free demo on the equipment.

Also, educate your entire staff on the program, so they can answer questions from members. Invite them to a demo, too, so they can get a feel for the exercise.

Let Your Members Experience It. With any new offering, first invite members to try the class before signing up. Plan and promote a monthly open house to introduce mat classes and your Pilates studio to potential participants.

Go Outside the Club. Many programs offer drop-in class fees for nonmembers. It's a great way to recruit potential new members. How do you get to them? Network. Visit neighborhood businesses and promote your classes. Conduct demos at a local business park or school. Network with physicians, physical therapists and other alternative health practitioners. They are important sources for referring clients and patients to your Pilates program.

attention. In addition, individuals with specific goals—serious athletes, for example—will require different programming than those with special physical needs. Sometimes the group setting is not appropriate. In this case, some members may start with privates, then progress to groups once their skill level has improved.”

GROUP REFORMER EXERCISE

“This is perfect for those who like a social dynamic,” says Ramirez. “It costs less than individual sessions (\$15-\$40 per class in her facility), so it will attract people who may not be able to afford a one-on-one session on a regular basis.”

Gonzalez concurs: “Most group Pilates classes are still much smaller than other group ex classes, so participants get a lot of instructor attention, which brings a lot of value to the class.” Group classes typically contain three to six participants.

The challenges to offering group reformer classes usually center around available floor space and the initial equipment investment. “Yes, there’s an investment, but clubs can recoup it fairly quickly,” says Gonzalez. “If your instructors are retaining their participants, it usually takes only a few months.”

PRIVATE PILATES SESSIONS

Private Pilates sessions are excellent revenue generators, usually priced from \$50 to \$100 per session. They also require less equipment and space and are fantastic for

working with members with special needs. But the cost will be a barrier for some.

“You have to know your financial demographic,” Ramirez states. Even for those who are interested, you still have to price your class appropriately. A club in Des Moines cannot successfully charge the same as a club in downtown Chicago. It’s amazing how many clubs don’t realize that at first.”

Private sessions also require an appropriate environment, so you’ll need a space that can facilitate a proper body-mind atmosphere.

SPECIALTY CLASSES

“The great thing about Pilates is that the exercises can be modified to meet the needs of people with specific needs or interests. Pilates for golfers, Pilates for tennis players—these classes are great for getting members with similar athletic interests together. They’re becoming extremely popular,” says Ramirez.

Specialty classes can also bring members with similar lifestyles together. Classes such as Pilates for Older Adults and Pilates for Pre- and Postnatal Mothers are cropping up at clubs all over the world. ●

Daniel Wilson is a freelance writer based out of Rocklin, California.

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