



Fitness trend: Will high-tech gyms be the future plus give you a better workout? Winter 2009

Planning to build or renovate your fitness centre? A new trend is catching on in the U.S. and no doubt will soon find its way to Canadian fitness centres.

Exertainment, acknowledges that boredom can be a major disincentive to working out in a fitness gym and relies heavily on technology to address it. An example is not even the gym's multiple television screens could distract Arianne Thompson from the drudgery of her cardio workout.

Bored, the 35-year-old would trudge along until the cooking shows and courtroom dramas grew unbearable, and then call it a day. "The channels they show, and the time of day that I work out, made for a really boring workout," Thompson, a member of Gold's Gym, wrote in an email.

A gym renovation last year gave her a much-needed jolt of motivation. A new addition, dubbed the "cardio theatre," boasts a cinema-size screen and rows of treadmills, elliptical trainers and stationary bikes. In the darkened room, members watch movies while they sweat.

"When the movie is good or even tolerable, I get into it and become so absorbed that I don't notice I'm exercising," wrote Thompson, who lives near Salt Lake City, Utah. "I can work out twice as long with half the pain and boredom when I work out to a movie than I can to the TV or music."

It's no surprise that most people don't enjoy the "work" part of working out. Roughly two-thirds of Canadians say lack of motivation is an important barrier to exercise, according to 2007 data from the nonprofit Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute.

But just as Nintendo's Wii Fit got video game fans to move by turning exercise into play, more and more gyms are hoping gadgets and gizmos will lure less-than-enthusiastic exercisers.

In the U.S., where "exertainment" is firmly entrenched, gyms are racing to install the latest tech toys – and experts say it won't be long until Canada follows suit.

"Customers want something that helps the time go by, that helps the mind escape the drudgery of exercise," says fitness consultant Gregory Florez, head of FitAdvisor Health Coaching Services in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Nowadays, fitness gyms "have to be in the tech game," Florez says. "There's this expectation from customers to have newer and cooler things."

Some, like the U.S. chain 24 Hour Fitness, have focused on technology that improves athletic performance. Last year, the company installed the Nike + iPod system, which connects members' iPods to the cardio machines and records their workouts. Users can then download the data to their home computer.

Other gyms opt for entertainment. Cardio theatres, like the one Thompson uses, are multiplying. This spring, a new Gold's Gym in London, Ontario, opened one of the few cardio theatres this side of the border. The chain introduced similar facilities in the U.S. more than two years ago. Meanwhile, the Ohio chain Fitworks launched Game On! an arcade stocked with active video games that make kids break a sweat.

The future, Florez says, will bring social networking into the mix.

The seed was planted when Nike + iPod users started comparing workout logs online, eventually forming a lively virtual community. Similar networks in a gym setting could provide members with valuable support, he adds.

It usually takes from six to 18 months for American trends to move north, says Rod Macdonald, vice-president of Can-Fit-Pro, Canada's largest certification body for fitness professionals. The latest technologies were showcased in Toronto in August, at the International Fitness and Club Business Conference and Trade Show.

While everyone loves a "shiny new toy," gym owners and members shouldn't expect miracles from technology, Macdonald warns.

"Typically, technology doesn't attract people into fitness centres," he says, because customers only see it once they're already inside. And anything too complicated could turn people off, he adds, noting that today many fitness centre users ignore the programmed functions on cardio and other machines.

Meanwhile, exercisers engrossed in technology could tune out important physical cues, such as breathing and heart rate – the best measures of exercise intensity.

Anderson is also quick to point out the pitfalls of cardio theatres. The dark room, while great for ambiance, makes exercise tricky, he warns. "When you jog in the dark, staring to the side rather than straight ahead, you can lose your footing." As well, gym-goers should prepare to endure uninspiring movies, he says, or worse – scary ones.

There's a reason workouts seem easier when you're watching TV – it's because they are.

Researchers at Elon University in North Carolina studied the effects of various distractions on exercisers, and found those watching television didn't work as hard as those listening to music, or toiling in silence.

"They were working at a very, very low intensity," says Paul Miller, one of the researchers involved in the study, performed in 2006 and slated for publication later this year.

"I think they got so engrossed, they didn't pay attention to physical cues."

While studies have shown music helps athletes push harder and longer, the Elon team is one of the first to look at television. Many exercisers count on the small screen to entertain them during a workout, without knowing its impact.

In the first phase of the study, 29 participants between 18 and 22 years old pedaled on a recumbent bike for 30 minutes at a self-selected intensity.

Each participant repeated the experiment three times, once watching TV, once with music and once with no distractions. The researchers recorded their output and how they felt.

Both music and television improved exercisers' mood, but television reduced their performance.

"The people with video were barely doing anything," Miller says.

In the second phase, 25 participants ran on a treadmill for 30 minutes at a fixed intensity. Each participant repeated the experiment three times, once with each variable.

Again, music was the preferred diversion, and made people feel their best.

Miller's advice: "Pick a good playlist on your iPod."