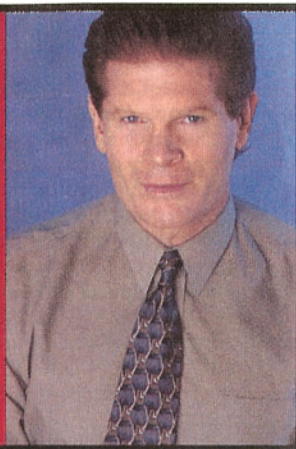


COMMENTARY

The Future of Health Club Design Is "Experience"

Bruce Carter



Most every industry that deals directly with the public has put extensive psychological research into how they can create environments that will get people to behave in certain desired ways—which is usually to spend more money once they are in that particular environment. The casino industry has this down to a science. They do not put

Design and decor are becoming an integral part in creating an extraordinary experience for members and potential new members.

windows in the gaming areas so people will lose their sense of time and keep gambling through the night and into the day. The food and retail industries invest heavily in creating beautifully moving environments that cause people to want to spend more. These three industries sell something that most people love to do. On the other hand, the health club industry sells something that most people hate to do—exercise. That is why clubs must do a better job of creating inspirational environments that attract people back to exercise, and club design is clearly headed in this direction.

In their book, *The Experience Economy*, Joseph Pine and James Gilmore strongly communicate that people are looking for memorable and lasting impressions that will ultimately transform something within them. Design and décor are becoming an integral part in creating an extraordinary experience for members and potential new members. Service and extensive equipment are great, but they are no longer enough to make a notable impact on most people.

Picture entering the soon-to-open Gold's Gym in Columbia, S.C. You walk into a 30-foot-high rotunda with a beautiful marble fountain in the center and 15-foot-high ficus trees with café tables on the perimeter of the circular space. Then you move up to a sparkling midnight granite-topped control desk with a golden glow surrounding the whole area. Can this be a workout place, you wonder? Beyond, you see a wide range of lighting, plants, energizing colors and differently shaped spaces with equipment that has eye-catching colors for the frames and upholstery that you have never seen before. As

you enter the locker rooms, you think you are in an upscale spa with beautiful stonework, oversized showers and lounge areas. Throughout the club is a wonderful blend of audiovisual entertainment and educational experiences. Now, all of a sudden the dreaded experience

of exercise has been transformed into something totally different. By the time you hear the prices, there is a soft smile on your face, and you can easily see yourself making positive changes in your life in such a place. And, you can't wait to tell your friends about the wonderful surprise you just experienced.

Yet, as good as it all sounds, the more profitable clubs of the future will do all of this with a strict budget using the best money-saving techniques of profit designing. When Donald Trump first opened the Taj Mahal Casino in Atlantic City, he loudly proclaimed that his new casino cost a billion dollars while other

casinos cost half that amount. The Taj went bankrupt, overburdened with too much debt. They were never able to fully recover—they just went bankrupt again citing a debt that prevented them from upgrading and being competitive with other casinos that looked just as good but cost much less to build.

In interior design circles it is widely accepted that the least expensive yet most profound way to achieve an inspiring environment is the creative use of color. Color when used properly can do wonders. When used improperly, it can be offensive and disruptive. In addition, boxy spaces are giving way to areas shaped differently. Lighting, always an asset to the retail and restaurant industries, is now becoming equally important in state-of-the-art clubs. The good news is that existing clubs can renovate and totally transform themselves with reasonable costs. However, those who do not change because they think that their boring, uninspiring environments are not that important in getting people fit will clearly be at a disadvantage.

Just as someone walks into a restaurant and looks forward to being tantalized with good food and striking decor, so does the new "hoping-to-get-fit" market expect to walk into a club and see a beautiful environment in addition to great service and equipment. Clubs that are up to this challenge will be rewarded with more members having more memorable and lasting impressions of their club experience. These members will stay longer, spend more and want to share all of this with their friends and acquaintances.

The fitness industry is "growing up." No longer seen as a frivolous business that banks would shy away from, clubs need to invest the same way other industries have in the appearance of their physical facilities. As a result, club design and décor in the future will play an ever-expanding role in a club's success. ■

Bruce Carter is the president of Optimal Fitness Design Systems International, a club design firm that has created approximately \$420 million dollars worth of clubs in 45 states and 26 countries.