



Equipment Maintenance Is Key to Success

By Bob Baumgartner

In the fitness business, maintenance is a dirty word. The word "sales" is sexy, but "maintenance" is mundane, even boring. Most fitness center owners and managers don't give maintenance much thought. However, maintenance is key to the success of any fitness center. In the long run, maintenance may even be more important than sales. The hidden costs of not having a maintenance program include lost customers, legal liability and equipment repair and replacement costs.

Maintenance affects everyone

Members go to your fitness center to work out. If they can't work out because equipment is broken, then your facility isn't fulfilling its primary purpose. To members, seeing "out of order" signs on equipment represents a failure on the part of the fitness center; they'll either complain or, worse, go to the competition.

While broken equipment leads to a slow drain on your most important asset -- members -- a fast drain on fitness center resources can come from liability suits. Simply put, broken or worn-out products are a hazard. And a hazard to members presents a liability to facility owners. Product breakdowns can be dangerous. Stories abound: member hurt when cables on strength machine snaps; member thrown from treadmill that had a sudden burst of speed; person injured when stepper resistance fell out. Liability charges can translate into a huge, unexpected, out-of-pocket expense.

Logs reduce liability

Ryan Meier, president of the service company Fitguard Inc. in West Sacramento, Calif., serves as an expert witness in civil court cases. "The first thing that happens is attorneys request maintenance records," he says. "Clubs never have the properly documented maintenance information that they need." Without a complete maintenance log, Meier says, fitness centers cannot show that they have fulfilled their responsibility to keep members safe. "Documentation is critical to avoiding lawsuits....," Meier explains.

A case involving a member injured on a piece of equipment at a Health and Tennis Corp. facility underscored the need for equipment safety inspection records. According to Doyice J. Cotton, a consultant to the fitness industry, inspection records saved the day for the company. "Had there been no evidence of regular inspections, and the equipment been found faulty, Health and Tennis Corp. of America would probably have been found negligent in this case, and been liable for damages," Cotton wrote in the March 2003 issue of *Fitness Management* (p.30).

Prevention is half the battle

Besides helping meet member expectations and avoiding liability issues, a preventive maintenance program can help you get your investment out of a piece of equipment. Equipment that isn't maintained breaks down more quickly than equipment that is maintained. Service technicians agree on this point. "Having a maintenance program can actually cost less than not having a maintenance program," says Senad Haskovic, owner of US Fitness Service in Chicago, Ill. "If something breaks, I charge more to get there and a higher rate per machine," he says. "Plus, there's the cost for parts. And there's the inconvenience of down-time. A maintenance program really makes sense."

Service technicians point out that when people buy a car, they expect to change the oil, put air in the tires and do other maintenance work. But when many fitness center owners buy equipment, they don't plan to maintain it. To technicians, this doesn't make sense. "A treadmill, a bike, an elliptical -- whatever -- it's a machine," Haskovic says. "Every machine needs maintenance."

While unexpected breakdowns create extra repair expenses, the lack of a regular maintenance program shortens the product life. This translates into the need to buy new equipment sooner than would otherwise be necessary. The lack of maintenance means that facility owners don't get the biggest bang for their buck. Profit gets eaten up by repair fees and by new equipment costs.

"As a gym owner, it just makes good economic sense to take good care of your equipment," says Brant Wacker, owner of Gold's Gym in Everett, Wash. Wacker went so far as to personally attend a manufacturer's training course for technicians. "I've saved money already," he says. FM

Bob Baumgartner is the customer service supervisor for SportsArt America, Woodinville, Wash. He can be reached at 866 709 1750 ext. 115 or bob@sportsartamerica.com.

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