

Smart Gyms: Why Building Brains as well as Bodies is Smart Business

by Debra Em Wilson, Reading Specialist & Marcia Carter, Gym Owner/Coach

Smart phones became popular because they focused on the ever evolving needs and wants of a diverse world. Smart phones were originally called converged devices because they brought multiple technologies together into one small package for one stop shopping. Taking the lead from a multi-billion dollar industry, gym owners can create smart gyms that emulate the success of the smart phone.

Now, more than ever, families need to feel that their dollars spent at your gym are well worth the sacrifice of not being able to use that money elsewhere. Just like smart phone consumers, they are looking for value and one stop shopping to meet the diverse needs of all their family members. Even homes today are like smart phones with most everything needed under one roof including video games pretending to be like real activities, online shopping reducing the trips to the mall, and hundreds of television channels taking us anywhere we want to go.

Teaching parents the value of gymnastics for developing a well-rounded child is essential for getting them out of the house, let alone keeping them coming back to your facility once their child has taken a class for a test run. Like smart phone innovators, knowing what gaps there are in services for families in your community and finding a way to fill the gap is critical to the ongoing success of your business.

Steve Greeley, former gymnastics center owner in Simi Valley, CA, had the idea that he could provide a quality gymnastics program that also helped children learn better. Each year his gym, Imagymnation, was the sponsor of Special Olympics and developed programs aimed at creating well-rounded children focusing on body, mind, and emotional balance. His gym met the needs of the diverse families it served while filling a gap in the community. In an effect, Imagymnation was one of the original smart gyms. Steve was leading edge and ran an extraordinarily successful non-competitive gymnastics program, while also providing much needed support for families of children with special needs.

If your gym is empty during the day, expanding your offerings to programs that build strong minds as well as strong bodies may help increase revenue and separate you from your competitors. Possible offerings include preschool foundation classes, homeschool elective courses, after school enrichment, school-age tutoring, and senior Boomer programs. Smart is in. Parents want their children to be smart. Schools want their students to be smart. Aging Boomers want to remain smart. Savvy gym owners know exactly why their programs rank high in smartness factor.

Why Smart Gyms Raise the Smartness Factor: A Mini-lesson from a Reading Specialist

The more a child tumbles, climbs, creeps, and crawls, the more densely wired the brain becomes for academic success. Movement is the architect of a child's brain. The two hemispheres of the brain are designed to constantly communicate with one another. The left side of the brain controls the right side of the body, and vice versa. Bilateral activities, common to all gymnastic programs, require both sides of the body to work together and separately. Coordinated movement patterns create efficiency in the brain. Efficient pathways create fluent readers who complete reading tasks with ease. For example, during reading, the left hemisphere attends to letters and the sequence of words, while the right side of the brain focuses on comprehending what is read. Reading fluency depends on an intimate conversation between the two hemispheres of the brain— a clear signal, just like a smart phone.

Bouncing on the trampoline, tumbling down a mat, swinging from the bars—all these activities help wire the brain and integrate the vestibular system. Located in the inner ear, the vestibular system is intricately connected with the brain. Its job is to make sense of all perceived sensory information from the environment and tell us where our bodies are in space. Like the integrative technology of a smart phone, the vestibular system integrates vision, hearing, balance, and skin sensations. If children have poor sensory processing skills, they may have a difficult time learning gymnastics skills or regulating behavior. Weaknesses observed in gymnastics classes may lead to discovering that the child is struggling in school as well.

The No Child Left Behind legislation prompts parents to seek programs that help children meet the mandated academic standards expected of today's youth. Without your assistance, parents may overlook your gym as a valuable resource. You can help them see the real value of gymnastics programs by linking these programs to academic benefits, which is the focus created by No Child Left Behind and standards-based education. Duplicate the parent information page available at our web site titled "Gymnastics: Brains Under Construction" and hand it to every parent who enters your smart gym. When parents are cutting corners and deciding what extracurricular activities stay within their budgets, educating families is the key ensuring your program remains when others may go. Dr. John Ratey calls exercise "Miracle-Gro" for the brain. Adding classes with a smart twist can also be "Miracle-Gro" for your business.

How Other Gym Owners Are Expanding Their Programs and Doing a Great Service for Their Families and Communities

Marcia Carter, Director of the Feather River Recreation Activity Center, formerly the owner of Oroville Gymnastics Learning and Sports Academy, began a program specifically designed to help children be more successful in her gymnastics classes and at school. Meeting the needs of the families in her community, she offers specialized classes to build the foundational skills critical for emotional and academic success.

A teacher in Marcia Carter's community describes the benefits for children involved in classes offering gymnastics with an academic twist. "During these past four years I have been teaching kindergarten. I have noticed that the children from your preschool achieve reading goals sooner and with more ease than ever seen before. The children who come from your preschool are always well prepared for high state standards expected to be learned by kindergartners. I congratulate and thank you for all you do to help kindergarten students achieve these high expectations."

The Feather River Recreation Activity Center is expanding its classes to include Boomers, capitalizing on the need for more services for active seniors while bringing in increased revenue for the facility.

Dr. Nancy Bates, owner of Gym Magic Sports Center and Preschool in Las Cruces, NM, offers classes focusing on building a solid foundation for learning. "We emphasize education and learning. The response from our staff, parents, and children has been incredibly positive." Gym Magic created a program, titled Magical Moves (for 6 months to 3 years of age), which has led to partnerships with many early intervention groups. The response has been so positive that the early intervention groups have had to rotate families in and out of Gym Magic's program because too many families want to participate in the program.

The smart phone is thriving even in this economy because the creators studied the needs of diverse individuals and put the solutions into one cohesive smart package. Study the needs of your community by networking with early childhood organizations, public and charter schools, senior citizen advocacy groups, regional centers for children with special needs, and homeschooling parents. Find a way to offer programs to meet the needs of your community, package it under one roof, and create value for your families. Doing so will ensure a thriving business in any economy.