

THE FITNESS FUTURE: NEW RULES OF ENGAGEMENT FOR OPERATORS

COVID-19 has changed the way we operate in the fitness industry. Ian Mullane's white paper on the topic has attracted much global attention. Take a look for yourself.

The conditions of pre-COVID will never return. Willingness to accept this fact, and move with it, will be key to the survival of your fitness business. Embracing change isn't a choice. It's life and death.

That's because COVID wasn't ever the cause of change: it accelerated things that were happening anyway. We might have arrived at this position less battered and bruised had COVID not unleashed itself on the world, but make no mistake: we would have found ourselves in the same position with or without it.

Digitisation, 5G, at-home offerings, evolved working patterns... the fitness industry has never faced so many new factors to evaluate. That much has been talked about extensively. But here's the bit people haven't really acknowledged yet.

As a result of this snowstorm of new factors, the industry has found itself blinded. Uncertain not only about how to stand up to the competition, but about who its competitors even are!

One thing is for sure: the relationship customers seek with a fitness business is changing. The sector must adapt, and fast. The concern is that, to do so effectively, genuine enthusiasm for technological innovation will be required. This from an industry that has thus far been lukewarm in its embrace of progress and reluctant to adapt to change. But there are very real opportunities for operators who are prepared to accept the new reality and reposition themselves for the inevitable.

The term 'hybrid' has permeated

conversations across the sector ever since COVID-19 forced gyms closed and consumers online. Granted, the first step had to be for operators to look beyond the bricks and mortar of their physical facilities. But turning to hybrid as the solution is limiting horizons and causing problems for the longer term. A 'hybrid model' is in fact a huge simplification of what's actually needed. It encourages operators to think about their digital offering as an island: part of a dual offering of on-site and digital.

The current rush to deliver such a model – centred on a digital extension of the physical experience – may be well-intentioned, but it isn't necessarily a good fit for the new marketplace.

First of all, given digital will only be a complement to, not a replacement for, the gym experience once all facilities are open again – there's the good news – I am more likely to choose a digital offering that supplements my on-site activities with a variation, or indeed something completely different, rather than a digital version of the on-site product. If I attend the gym for group cycling and strength training, what I want from a digital subscription is stretching, yoga, meditation.

More important still, is the fact that the future of fitness is categorically not binary. Not hybrid. Value will only be unlocked for the consumer when all content, all experiences, indeed the entirety of a club's offering are part of the customer's personal wellness ecosystem.

Consider, for example, how much more useful an app such as Strava is when

integrated with Apple Health or Google Fit, with all your personal metrics updated automatically. Customers now have a more holistic view of what defines wellness, picking and choosing their products and services accordingly. In doing so, they build their own ecosystem, of which their gym is but one part.

Ecosystems are everywhere: Amazon Video as part of Prime membership, Apple TV as part of the Apple One subscription service... done right, every touchpoint enhances the customer experience. Done right, any entry point can drive the audience to extend their relationship with you. Crucially, though, it's not about technology. It's about experiences – and about making the customer the centre of that experience. ♦



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Ian Mullane's full white paper called *The Fitness Future: Rules of Engagement – Six Rules for Operators* explains how to go about this business-critical repositioning. Download your free copy from [here](#).