

TREND SETTERS

Keeping an eye on emerging exercise trends enables the industry to plan for growth and development. Caroline Roberts looks at the predictions for 2014





The sports and leisure industry is subject to a bewildering number of activity and policy trends, and each year, the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) releases the results of a survey of predictions for the coming year. Trends for 2013 included children and obesity, core training and functional fitness. So what activities and themes can we expect to see more of in 2014?

High-intensity interval training (HIIT) comes out as the top trend in the survey of more than 4,000 health and fitness professionals worldwide. The new entry knocks the trend for training and certification of fitness professionals off the top spot it held last year, although this continues to be seen as important and appears at number three in this year's survey.

HIIT involves a series of short bursts of extreme effort each followed by a recovery period. It has been credited with delivering greater fitness benefits and burning more fat than sustained moderate cardio exercise, stimulating the production of human growth hormone, and lowering blood sugar levels. And with sessions typically lasting less than 30 minutes, it has obvious appeal for the time-poor.

However, survey respondents raised concerns about the potential risks. It can lead to unfit exercisers pushing themselves too hard resulting in injury, nausea, fainting and worse. In its pure form, it's obviously not suitable for everyone. But research suggests that a modified version tailored to individual fitness is beneficial to the majority of exercisers.

HIIT's popularity signals a renewed focus on fitness goals that gyms would do well to tap into, says Dr Paul Bedford, sports scientist and expert in exercise adherence. However, there is a correlation between intensity of training and





Never too late: fitness for older adults is at number seven in the ACSM list of trends for 2014

drop-out rate, with people less likely to continue with demanding programmes. “Gyms need to focus on giving members results rather than just selling them access to a space,” he says. “It’s important that they support and educate members rather than just leaving them to get on with it. It’s about making use of existing fitness staff to programme and reprogramme clients’ exercise regimes so we keep them focused on their goals and encourage them to make the next visit.”

BACK TO BASICS

Coming second in the ACSM’s survey is training using the exerciser’s own body weight, a method which uses the minimum of equipment so can be done anywhere. It is, of course, nothing new, but has been

repackaged by many gyms to include a wider range of exercises than the traditional push-ups and pull-ups.

The method has obvious appeal for the cash-strapped and suggests a move towards more straightforward and conventional training programmes, a trend that has also been noted by London personal trainer Julia Buckley.

“There’ll be all kinds of new fitness apps and devices coming out in the New Year no doubt, which many people will enjoy and find useful,” she says. “But at the same time it seems to me that many are discovering that gadgets and gizmos often just add an unnecessary layer of complexity to their workouts. A lot of people come to me hankering to get back to basics when it comes to equipment and I think this

year many clubs and trainers will find their customers are ready to rediscover the benefits of good old-fashioned pull-up bars, monkey bars, dumbbells and barbells.”

Budget, no-frills gym chains, which often offer 24-hour opening, continue to expand throughout the UK, with leading operator The Gym Group planning to open up to 30 new clubs a year. Exercising at night was not one of the trends identified in the ACSM survey, but research by The Gym Group has found that one in 10 members use the gym between 10pm and 6am, with about half of their visits taking place around midnight. Night opening inevitably raises security concerns, and every Gym Group gym is monitored by CCTV and help buttons with direct links to the emergency services.

So is the 'open all hours' model a viable option for the public sector facilities? No, says Bedford. "With the type of buildings the public sector has, they are not set up to be open 24 hours a day. You will have problems such as people trying to get into a swimming pool when they are not supposed to. The budget market is cheap because they give a very basic service. Often local authority-run centres are bit more expensive so they need to think more about the member experience."

The ageing population means that fitness programmes for older adults continue to be popular, coming seventh in the ACSM survey. However, says Bedford, there is also a need to tap into the 35-plus age group. Two-thirds of exercisers in the UK are under 35 but they only make up a third of the population. "Facilities need to start thinking about how they can bring in the slightly older age group with a more joined-up approach so that families can be active at the same time. Parents taking the children swimming should be involved in an activity themselves, rather than just sitting and watching."

COMPLEX CLASSES

And what of classes? The survey suggests that Zumba is declining in popularity, dropping out of the ACSM survey's top 20 this year. Yoga in its many different guises, however, is experiencing a resurgence, and has risen to number 10.

"Faddy classes will doubtless come and go, as always," says Buckley. "But I believe that more people, women in particular, are coming to understand that training for strength and explosive fitness with a well-designed programme, or one-to-one personal trainer sessions, will do much more to get them closer to their fitness and body shape goals. So next year we may just see fewer people queuing outside the studio."

Bedford adds: "There should be more focus on entry-level classes suitable for people who are really



Give up the gadgets: industry experts foresee a move away from high-tech equipment and back to basics

inactive. Classes that are too complex can be overwhelming for beginners, so they need a stepping stone into group exercise."

Exercising in the open air is still popular, says Buckley, but many people are looking for something a bit more exciting. "I think more people will be signing up to multi-sport events like triathlons and Iron Man, and even wacky races like the Zombie Runs and Color Runs, where people throw coloured powder at the participants.

"I recently did the Brighton Color Run and it was lovely to see lots of families and people of all ages, shapes and sizes having a great time. Other events that reflect popular culture are popping up, like the Zombie Evacuation Race and races where runners dress up as superheroes.

"I think the non-competitive ethos of a lot of these events helps to make them more accessible to people who are not already very active," she adds. "At the Color Run, no one was 'racing'; there was no timing or any kind of competitive element. It was all about having fun." ●

The ACSM survey top 10 trends for 2014

1. High-Intensity Interval Training
2. Body Weight Training
3. Continued moves to professionalise the industry with education and certification for fitness staff
4. Strength training
5. Exercise as part of weight-loss programmes
6. Personal training
7. Fitness programmes for older adults
8. Functional fitness aimed at improving ability to perform the activities of daily life
9. Group personal training
10. Yoga (variety of formats)