Even as Gyms Reopen, the Pandemic Will Still Impact How and Why Consumers Exercise



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Key Insights

When New York City gyms closed in mid-March, Equinox instructor Amanda Katz was immediately out of work. But instead of discontinuing her classes, she began lifting weights, leading ab workouts and sweating with her students on Instagram Live. Although going from working in a fitness studio to her studio apartment took some getting used to, Katz knew she had a responsibility to give her clients some sense of routine throughout a period of uncertainty.

“Our current climate feels out of control,” she said. “If there is one consistent activity in my community’s schedule that also brings them joy, then I’ve done my job.”

Those who were once opposed to at-home exercise have had no

choice but to make do with what is available online, and even after fitness centers reopen and workout classes start up again, experts predict the industry will still feel the effects of this forced digitalization. Fitness brands will need to tailor their messages to consumers to address health concerns, incorporate remote fitness plans and prioritize exercise enjoyment over visible results.

“The industry is going through a digital disruption,” said Allen Adamson, co-founder of Metaforce and professor at NYU’s Stern School of Business. “Quarantine has accelerated changes that were already happening. If you’re trying to build a digital business, now is the time to step on the gas because now everyone is a potential customer.”

This disruption comes as consumers may be even more concerned with staying in shape than they were before, which is something brands need to be cognizant of.

“People become anxious when they aren’t moving in the way that they used to,” said nutrition counselor and fitness instructor Caitie Corradino. “It has only amplified body image and weight concerns that they were already having.”

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Permanent changes to fitness

Since the beginning of quarantine, fitness companies have found creative ways to engage their members remotely by expanding online services, livestreaming workouts on social media and offering additional lifestyle content, such as healthy recipes and family workouts.

Although consumers have adjusted to at-home workout routines, many leaders in the industry predict that once stay-at-home orders are lifted, members will be ready to head back to the gym.

Sharad Mohan, the CEO and co-founder of the personal training software Trainerize, said the social element of the gym is what members miss the most, suggesting fitness brands "run in-gym challenges that spark healthy competition and camaraderie, run limited-edition, in-person classes or offer up free trials for in-person training."

Chad Waetzig, evp of marketing and branding at Crunch Fitness, said 83% of its members were anxious to get back to the gym. "There is a certain social component, the benefit of getting proper coaching, and it is incredibly motivating for some people."

Waetzig shared that roughly half of Crunch members were dissatisfied with their at-home fitness program.

Mohan also predicted that the industry will see "a long period of transition and apprehension" before members are ready to head back to the gym. In order to combat that reluctance, Mohan suggested fitness companies focus on a hybrid of in-person and remote services while focusing on community-based initiatives.

Orangetheory Fitness has done just that, expanding at-home workouts for both members and nonmembers during quarantine. Chief brand officer Kevin Keith said that "the pandemic greatly accelerated the brand's plans to evolve as a hybrid in-studio and digital fitness model," adding that its in-home workouts aren't meant to replace the in-studio experience.

To address health concerns, Planet Fitness has promised heightened cleanliness by introducing the The Clean Thumb Club initiative. The company will use touchless check-ins, install more cleaning stations and temporarily halt the use of cardio

equipment that does not comply with social distancing.

Navigating shifts in the industry

In order to survive the digitalization of the industry, Adamson stressed that “now is the time to push.” As consumers see online fitness as a reliable alternative, he said, trainers and gyms must continue to offer these resources while also reminding clients of the social aspects they may miss about the gym.

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Pages: 1 2

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