

Every Inch Counts: Maximizing Underutilized Space in Your Facility

Health and fitness clubs need to make the most of their square footage. Avoid 'dead zones' and wasted space by implementing some new member benefits — for less than you might expect.

By Mary Helen Sprecher

A lot of people have a junk closet - a seldom-looked-at place where unused items tend to collect. Ultimately, junk closets are wasted space, and could be a whole lot neater and more useful. The same thing tends to happen with unused space at clubs.

You know what we're talking about because chances are, you have such a space in your club. Maybe it's a corner in a public area where members tend to drop their bags and coats in a messy heap, rather than using a locker. Maybe it's a place people tend to congregate before or after working out. Maybe it's just an old vacant office.

No matter what size it is, or what the area used to be, it's certainly not doing you any favors today. It's time to reclaim that space, capitalize on its potential and put it to productive use. Maybe it can be a new source of income. Maybe it can just be a new point of interest or a new amenity for your members. Ultimately, it can add value to your club.

What might surprise you? Not all uses relate to fitness. According to the members of the American Sports Builders Association, or ASBA, (who design, build and furnish equipment for a variety of athletic facilities), not every available inch in a club should be filled with equipment. Sometimes, other amenities can be more useful to your members.

Large spaces

Maybe, once upon a time, an area was an aerobics room, a basketball court or a multi-purpose rec room with a rock climbing wall. Now it's just a parcel that winds up being used for occasional storage, or to hold old equipment that isn't in use any longer. Reclaim it for the following:

QuickStart Tennis: The QuickStart Tennis format endorsed by the U.S. Tennis Association, uses small courts, low nets and soft, lower-compression foam balls to teach children the basics of tennis. Surprise, though -- adults are finding it fun as well. Multiple courts can be set up with temporary nets, with lines on the floor marked by painter's tape so several games can be played in one area. (More bonus points: Those soft balls mean there's little chance of injury or damage caused by wild shots).

"A small area inside the indoor tennis building at our local YMCA was utilized for overflow of the QuickStart tennis program," notes Mark Brogan of Pro-Sport Construction, Inc. in Devon, PA.

(Note: Details on the QuickStart Tennis format are available at www.quickstarttennis.com).

Badminton: According to Lee Frankel, Tarkett Sports, Paris, France, the game that many Americans associate with summer picnics and barbecues can be a boon for club owners looking to fill indoor spaces. The court is small (44' long x 20' wide for doubles, slightly narrower for singles), and the game is easy to pick up, but provides an excellent workout as well as a fun chance to socialize.

“For the court owner,” Frankel notes, “it gets some new and different players in the club.” Organized badminton league play can bring in competitive enthusiasts of the sport (and new income, considering court fees can be charged). In addition, badminton players may wind up joining the club because they become involved with other sports, such as tennis, or because they want access to equipment or personal trainers.

Paddle Sports: While tennis remains the dominant racquet sport, there is a whole universe of other sports requiring physical fitness and hand-eye coordination, which are good for pick-up games or even for competitive play. Depending upon the space available, sports like paddle tennis, pickle ball, paddle ball (there are one-wall and four-wall varieties), padel and fronton (as well as many others) may be interesting additions to the club. Find information about specific sports by visiting the websites of the governing bodies or local competitive organizations or leagues.

Medium-Sized Spaces

Maybe what you have is a small area or even an unused office. How about the following:

Kid-Land: Think about creating a supervised play area for children, where members could leave young children while they work out. The area should have durable toys, books and some fun interactive items as well as (very important) a full-time babysitter. Also nice? A few desks or another area where kids can read or do homework quietly if they wish.

Lending Library: Ask your members to bring in magazines and books they aren’t using. Put in some inexpensive bookshelves or magazine racks and encourage members to recycle their reading materials by sharing them with others.

Social Space: Create small conversation areas with tables and chairs. Furniture needn’t be expensive or fancy - just comfortable and welcoming. Personal trainers can use the space to meet with clients, and members can use the area to socialize instead of standing around in groups all over the club.

Small Spaces

Maybe what you have is just a corner of a room, or part of an area that isn’t being used. How about...

Ping-Pong: A ping-pong table, balls and paddles are relatively inexpensive, and can provide ongoing entertainment and recreation for a wide variety of ages. Michael D. Cavanaugh, CEO of USA Table Tennis (the national governing body for ping-pong) estimates that there are 23 million families with ping-pong tables in their basements. The sport, he notes, is easy to play, promotes socializing among various groups (even those hard-to-please teens) and can be learned at any age. At its highest level, it’s an Olympic sport, but these days, he says, “We have evidence that playing ping-pong can mitigate the effects of Alzheimer’s Disease.”

A Public Computer: A desk with a computer and chair will allow members to quickly check e-mail or use the Internet before or after working out. Set a time limit (say, 15 minutes per person if others are waiting), and post any other rules that members should abide by. Remember: You want to encourage your members to think of the club as a place with multiple amenities, but not as a second office.

A ‘Giving Box:’ One club recently began the practice of putting out a large plastic container with

requests to members to contribute goods to various charities. One month, there was a collection of back-to-school supplies for needy kids; at holidays, it was new and unwrapped toys; at one point, it was pet supplies for the local animal shelter. Look around for organizations in your area that need help: food banks, homeless shelters, the Ronald McDonald House, etc.

Open Minds, Open Spaces

Keep rethinking the spaces in your club, and looking at what you have. Fitness is full of trends, and today's hot exercise program or popular machine may be less than interesting in the future. Walk through your facility regularly and see if any equipment, programs or areas are going unused.

If something isn't being used, ask yourself why. Sometimes, facilities (such as squash or racquetball courts) require the presence of a pro who can help set up lessons or leagues. In other cases, members might be intimidated about trying a new sport, program or machine. Set up 'demo days' or open houses, in which there are clinics and instructions on how to use the facilities.

Remember that a club is only as good as the extent to which it can stay in touch with its members. Find out what yours want, and then keep them coming back by re-using old spaces to generate excitement and new interest.

Note: The American Sports Builders Association (ASBA) is a non-profit association helping designers, builders, owners, operators and users understand quality sports facility construction. The ASBA sponsors informative meetings and publishes newsletters, books and technical construction guidelines for athletic facilities. Available at no charge is a listing of all publications offered by the Association, as well as the ASBA's Membership Directory. Info: 866-501-ASBA (2722) or www.sportsbuilders.org