

In this section

- 13 Opinion – David Minton
- 14 Analysis – 2007 Remuneration Survey
- 15 Insight – Cayman Islands tourism
- 17 Sponsor Feature – RBS on real estate
- 18 Business Sense – Data analytics
- 20 Insight – Social networking
- 21 Appointments
- 22 Sharewatch, Diary dates

Insight



David Minton says events across the fitness industry are shaping up like a reality TV show. Producers must be careful the public doesn't switch off.

Reality bites

Welcome back from your summer holidays to tube strikes, and to the ongoing 'reality television' programme that's invaded the fitness industry.

The tube strike had the advantage of getting more people, more active, more often, at least for one week. The shared sense of shock and distress that a vital public service could be withdrawn quickly changed into muted enjoyment. En masse the population of London was forced to be more active to get to work. Like any city where there's essential use of the public transportation systems the need to move to and from the tube, tram, bus and train will result in additional walking and natural extra activity as a matter of course; but when the system is closed down, more activity has to take place.

In the US a new study, 'A Silver Lining? The Connection between Gas Prices and Obesity', shows a dramatic correlation between falling obesity rates when petrol prices have risen. The study calculated that an increase of \$1 (50p) per gallon in real prices would reduce US obesity by 15% after five years and that would save 16,000 lives and \$17bn a year. Petrol in the US reached a record high in May 2007 of \$3.22 (£1.60) a gallon – but it must and will go higher. What the next study should calculate is what would happen if the US paid the equivalent of \$6 a gallon, as we currently do in the UK.

An 'experimental' study from the Office for National Statistics that takes into account population data, death records and disabilities or long-term illness found Didcot in Oxfordshire to be the healthiest place to live, with a healthy life expectancy of 86 years. This compares with Middlehaven in Middlesborough with a healthy life expectancy of only 54.9 years. The deputy mayor of Didcot said residents care about their health and tended to cycle or walk to the railway station, plus there's a busy sports club network and sports centre, compared to Middlehaven with no public sports facility.

For Londoners, where healthy life expectancy can range widely, the tube strike would have been the perfect time to reinforce the benefits of walking up those stairs and getting off the bus a stop earlier. When inactivity is estimated to cost the country £8.2bn I did wonder if we should ask Transport for London to switch off all escalators once a week from now on and make all able bodied people alight from buses a stop, or two, before the terminus. After all we've moved from inactivity in schools, so why not amongst the rest of the population? In 2002 only 25% of school children took part in two hours of

quality sport and physical activity, yet by 2008 that figure will have jumped to around 85%. At present the drop-off in post-school participation remains dramatic, from over 60% between the ages of 11 to 15, to around just 20% for those aged 16 to 24.

The reality is, of course, that the population at large is lazy and we're not going to stop people using the labour-saving devices like lifts and escalators without a concerted campaign. In Japan, the often frantic and demeaning show, 'Gaki no tsukai' is a voyeurism-focused 'reality television' programme that took away lifts and escalators for fun. Although viewers saw a very modified and highly influenced form of reality, Tokyo now claims a higher level of activity amongst its 30 million population.

Critics say the term 'reality television' is somewhat of a misnomer as the 'fly-on-the-wall' style shows are often completely fabricated. Yet the Learning and Skills Council claims that one in seven UK teenagers hopes to gain fame by appearing on a reality show. I don't know about fame, but if these teenagers joined the fitness industry, they could be part of our own reality show.

Some of you have already been unwilling and innocent contestants, while too many find they are still involved. As long as the majority of us are simply voyeurs we find it's compelling viewing.

The highest-rating reality game show at the moment is 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire' being played out on the Esporta Channel, 24 hours a day. I could sum it up as: unknown contestant calls a friend, gets jackpot, but fails to answer key question on management; uses up all his life lines and loses all. This show has everything: drama, intrigue, and while the viewing figures go through the roof, debts go through the floor and administrators walk into the holding company. So far it looks like the unknown contestant will lose money, banks may lose money and private equity may lose 'loan-note' money; but are users still losing weight?

Meanwhile, on the dating-based competition show 'Love Island', shot from locations in the Caribbean, Next Generation's management team have their hands full playing one of six brands off against another. Although all the viewers know the outcome – it's obvious David Lloyd Leisure will win – the way the others lose out and at what cost across the fragile eco-systems will make good viewing.

On the 'Self-Improvement-Renovation-Make-Over-Show' Channel we have a battle brewing between IHSA and EHFA. Unlike the aforemen-

tioned show formats that include clubs and members, this one is for the hearts, minds and wallets of the big brands. Previous examples of the genre include 'Blind Date' and 'The Dating Game', but now both organisations are in love with Europe and are embarking on a wooing exercise. This will be played out in the 'fly-on-the-Brussels-wall format', or cinema verite, where the viewer and the camera are passive observers in stunning real life locations, which include all the major capitals of Europe. No tasks given to the cast (at least on-camera) have anything to do with the plot – that's constructed later. No... this is classic documentary-style reality stuff, hence the term 'docufitsoap'. Like most reality television if this docufitsoap didn't exist, you couldn't invent it and wouldn't want to. The viewer, however, can't see how this can be played out for long and in fact the ending is already in sight: a global role for one and a big regional role for the other.

Another, smaller 'docufitsoap' is being played out in 'Hell Hath No Fire Like a Woman's Kitchen Sink Drama' between the FIA and SIBEC on 7 November. We have around 260 working days in the year to organise events – and, yes, I know over on the public and private sector sports channel we sometimes have a number of major fixtures on the same day – but the schedulers in the fitness industry clash, again, on the 7th. Over 200 industry people will be at SIBEC in Spain while the FIA Industry Summit takes place on the same day in London. Surely we could get diaries together to avoid this next year. Could the FIA publish its annual diary at the beginning of each year in future, so we can all plan to be there and support the industry?

For some it's already too late. Most people who worked at the Livingwell Premier clubs found the 'reality' show 'Duncan's Dragons Den' a bit too close for comfort and have now moved on from the hidden cameras, hoaxes and fear-centric game show. The 24 Livingwell Premier clubs have improved the bottom line this year, but let's wait for next year's like-for-likes.

Meanwhile, the advert with Blackberry impresses the City and so let me leave you with the thoughts of Duncan ('Mr Whippy' to his Hollywood friends) Bannatyne: "Phone, camera, email, games, music.... My Blackberry has everything. A bit like my health clubs, actually."

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