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David Minton defies the doom-mongers with a welcome dose of good news – the UK fitness industry is in rude health and has plenty to smile about

Reasons to be cheerful

After the Pirelli Calendar and ‘Mercedes’ in the Graham & Green Catalogue we now have another collectable in the shape of the annual Escape Fitness catalogue. As someone at Cannons Bromley said, ‘Bring back the nurse!’ Not content with just pushing the boundaries of product information in the Functional Fitness Guide (2008), Escape has conducted and published the results of its own attitudinal survey, and some of the findings need wider publicity.

One of the questions they asked site owners and managers concerned future prospects. You too can play along with this survey ... Ask yourself: this year, will your business: Grow, Stay or Shrink? A very positive 73% answered ‘Grow’, 26% thought Stay (the same) and only 1% anticipated Shrinking. Escape also asked what the Top 10 challenges were and in this respect number one was ‘Member Retention’, with almost half of all respondents, 46%, putting it at the top of their challenges. Down at number nine, the credit crunch received only 9% of the votes.

The answers are positive and so are the stories behind them, so let’s look at some of these people (and brands) who are keen to portray themselves as among the winners in the current economic slowdown. They are not only defying the newspaper headlines but are completely hidden from view because the media, generally, can’t stand good news, so it doesn’t get reported.

We’re one year into the so called credit crunch, yet there’s no slowdown of new openings across the public and private leisure sector. Considerable investment is also going into refurbishment and expansion of sites. On average, 10 new fitness sites have opened each month in 2008, while in August we have at least 15 sites in pre-sale.

The openings to date are almost equally split between the public and private sectors, and each month over 10,000 people sign up as members. So let me share some great news stories with you that reflect both the very positive responses Escape received in its attitudinal survey, and what I see and hear as I travel around the country.

One new opening that got a bit more coverage than normal was The Gym in Hounslow, west London. This new venture is backed by Bridges Ventures, the socially-aware private equity firm where the social impact scorecard is reported to investors alongside the financial returns. So far The Gym has done just what it intended; it’s expanded the mar-

ket, delivered social and regeneration impact, and all in an environmentally-friendly way. The Gym is the brainchild of industry veteran John Treharne, who in the last recession opened the first of the Dragons clubs in a converted squash club in 1991. In 2008, Treharne has opened a 24-hour, seven day a week, affordable club accessed by pin number. The rather eye-catching pre-opening offer of £9.99 per month delivered quite comfortably over 5,000 members, who all signed up electronically. The Gym is also delivering socially, as the membership mirrors the demographics of the local population, something to which few public or private fitness sites can lay claim, and when around 40% are ‘first time’ joiners it’s also expanding the market. In keeping with Bridges socially-aware credentials and with The Gym needing to keep its carbon footprint to a minimum, an innovative lighting scheme will save over £2,000 per year on the energy bill.

Environmental considerations have been taken into account at the £12.3m Freemans Quay Leisure Centre in Durham, which opened in July. Competition Line invested £2.2m towards the project and now manages the 130-station fitness area under its Lifestyle Fitness brand. This development is a good example of urban renewal and partnership arrangements between the public, voluntary and private sectors aimed at encouraging wider recreational activity. The development sits smack in the city centre, alongside the Durham Sixth Form Centre - which uses the sports hall on weekdays - and the city’s new Walkergate leisure and hotel complex. The centre’s website is really user-friendly and links seamlessly into the Lifestyle Fitness site where, again, you can join online and get the opening offers of three months free and £32.50 per month anytime membership, which is inclusive of swimming and classes. The website also has one of the first instant mash-ups from Google maps that I’ve seen outside our own in-house version. You can take a 3D guided tour of the fitness area, courtesy of Life Fitness, and there’s a blog for consumer-generated feedback. The only thing that lets this site down is the Durham City website: after three weeks, it still hasn’t been updated to show the centre is open. Still, great news on membership and usage: following a successful pre-sale over 1,500 have signed up for the fitness and 8,159 people went swimming for a shilling (5p) in the first week. A shilling was the price of a swim in 1932 at Elvet Baths which have been replaced by the new centre.

Industry insiders wonder what sort of revolution JJB is about to unleash

JJB Fitness Clubs are not in Durham yet, but each time I look at their roll-out plans it reminds me of the 1969 comedy, *If It’s Tuesday This Must Be Belgium* as the list of UK place names seems endless. Dunstable in June, Nottingham and Morecambe in July, Cambridge in August, Barrow-in-Furness September and these are all the ‘standard’ JJB Fitness offering. The end of August will also see the launch of JJB’s even more affordable new brand ‘MiFit’ and while Barry Aspinall, managing director of JJB Fitness Clubs, is very excited by this new development some industry insiders wonder what sort of revolution he’s about to unleash. I’m looking forward to telling you more in a future column.

In the Malvern Hills, the Malvern Spa has opened its wellness centre and in just two weeks over 200 have signed up, which is not bad when you’re paying London prices in the provinces. I can’t wait for the hotel and organic restaurant to open in August.

Meanwhile, with 36 facilities including new 20m pool and new Life Fitness gym, plus a timetable with over 40 aerobic classes, the long established Parklands Country Club has raised the game on Glasgow’s Southside. I like the campaigning style of Michael Modlin, the director of Parklands, who has made a £2m investment and now only employs staff in the new gym - which opened in June - who have a minimum of REPS level 2. Investment, value for money, and a flexible attitude are all planned to keep his 3,500 loyal members happy.

Back in the City of London, where the credit crunch began, the third Gymbox site is in pre-sale before opening in September. So far over 500 have signed up to join this urban, funky brand with the catchy-sounding classes. Across town a new flagship Fitness First is in pre-sale at the former M&S office block on Baker Street and is due to open in September. This will be the ninth Fitness First site with a pool and will also feature a 14 sq ft boxing ring for the first time. With a pre-sale of over 1,000 and a few weeks to go before opening its well on target... and on that note I’m sorry to say I’ve run out of space... but not out of good news stories.

David is director of The Leisure Database Company.