

FIRST IMPRESSIONS ARE LASTING

In the second article in his series on gym membership retention **Dr Paul Bedford** investigates the impact that the induction process can have on how long a member stays



Having spent the last six years researching retention and attrition within the fitness industry, both via data analysis and personal experiences, it is time to weigh up the pros and cons of our practices regarding gym inductions and the effect they have on members' length of stay.

Over the past five years I have had 86 gym inductions in various locations across the country. The quality of these has ranged from exceptionally good to unbelievably poor. They included single and multiple appointments, group inductions and even inductions conducted by the cleaner.

Who got an induction, what did it consist of?

Research from retention reports by the Fitness Industry Association (FIA) identified that members place great importance on the induction process. The opportunity to have a consultation was highly regarded and nearly all members accepted the offer of an induction including a consultation and some time spent using the equipment.

Member focus groups described their dislike of group inductions. They could not understand why they were necessary and felt very uncomfortable participating in them

What's been tried?

Single-session inductions remain the most popular. These usually include a 60-minute session with an appropriately-trained member of the fitness staff. These single inductions usually contain a brief period of time used as a consultation to ascertain the wants, needs and desires of the member.

This consultation period usually includes some basic health screening, exercise experience and background information relative to the

member's lifestyle, sometimes including questions about smoking, drinking and sleeping patterns. The aim of this section is for the fitness staff to begin to understand the person in front of them.

This short period of time is expected to be sufficient to establish and build rapport before proceeding to the gym floor for the practical element.

How much of the information asked for is useful for the induction process and development of an exercise programme?

The practical element of the induction process usually has one of two formats. The first approach is to demonstrate all of the equipment in the gym, usually starting with the cardiovascular machines and then working on the resistance machines and finishing with some floor work or stretches.

This seems to be inappropriate and provides the member with too much information to take on board in too short a period of time. In

addition, new members may have no intention of using all the equipment available – even very few experienced members do.

The argument for this approach is usually based around reducing the risk of an insurance claim rather than the benefit to the member.

The second approach is to introduce and demonstrate only the equipment relative to the member's wants and needs. This reduces the amount of equipment that the member is required to learn and increases the

opportunity for practice on the machines or floor exercises.

This approach would appear to favour the member's ability to learn new equipment and at a suitable pace.

The final part of the process is to provide the member with a programme. Some operators provide this as part of the induction. Others require you to pay an additional fee for a programme.

Those using the second appointment for the programme usually are doing so solely as an additional revenue stream.

Members should have a programme at the end of their induction even if it is a set programme. Ideally, they should be given a basic outline of the types of exercises that relate to their wants, needs and desires. They should not be left to work out and remember all of the information they were given during their induction period.

It is still possible to join a facility and have no induction. This usually occurs when a member states they have used a gym before.

This may be appropriate, however I would suggest that at least a brief period of time is spent with a member of the fitness staff just to expose the new member to the staff and provide some point of personal contact. This provides the member with an opportunity to explore possible training variation without the need for a full induction.

Group inductions

Group inductions are generally inappropriate when trying to provide a level of service within a facility. The exception to this would be in a university setting where very large numbers join at the beginning of the academic year. In this setting it is not possible to provide individual inductions as numbers range from one to five thousand – or more – applying for facility use in a few weeks.

Member focus groups run for the FIA

retention reports, described their dislike of group inductions. They could not understand why they were necessary and felt very uncomfortable participating in them.

Multi-appointment inductions

As a result of the early FIA retention reports linking the frequency of visits in the first four weeks and its effect on long-term retention, a number of operators introduced multiple appointment induction. This is supported by research evidence from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence that providing individuals with behaviour change strategies and the opportunity to meet with a professional on multiple occasions has been successful at increasing physical activity.

Multiple appointment gym inductions usually consisted of extending the induction process over multiple appointments and increasing the amount of detail or equipment that the member was exposed to over that period of time. They do not generally have a component of behaviour change included.

While these multiple appointment inductions may have had some impact it is difficult to tell as none have been evaluated using scientific approaches. While operators report improved performance, it is not yet clear whether the types of members participating in multiple inductions are those that would have stayed anyway, such as older members, or those within fixed period contracts.

Tailor inductions to the member's needs

While many operators endeavour to ensure high-quality service through the delivery of a single induction process, this approach inevitably reduces the opportunity to provide a sense of individuality and customisation of the experience for the member. While everyone may be getting the same, it may be the same poor quality or inappropriate to the member's requirements.

Consideration should be made for the various types of members joining. Generally, these can be broken down into three types:

■ Those who have never been a member of a gym before and

require substantial support in the early stages;

■ Those who have been members before, but never really got going and dropped out before achieving any real success. This group are often not supported enough as it is assumed they know what to do; and

■ Those who are experienced gym users and are confident and competent to start using the gym with little or no support.

Providing all three types with the same inductions is likely to provide too little for some, too much for others and produce mediocre results.

Having interviewed nearly 23,000 members, they reported that they wanted to be competent in the use of the equipment, confident in moving around the facility or gym space and look like they know what they are doing when they use the machines.

Follow-up and support

Members have reported that lack of support in the early stages of membership was regarded as missed opportunities to engender a feeling that the club cared about its members and their progress. Overwhelmingly, they want staff to recognise the fact they have visited the gym. They want fitness staff to ask them if they require any help, usually so they can decline it, but they want the offer of help and support anyway.

We have seen that

it is possible to increase the likelihood of a member maintaining membership month on month when they have received interactions from fitness staff. Have one interaction with a member this month and the chances of them retaining their membership next month goes up by 20 per cent, rising to 80 per cent more likely to retain their membership if they are spoken to at least four times in the previous month.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dr Paul Bedford is an authority on retention and attrition management. He runs tailored retention management services at The Leisure Database Company (www.theleisuredatabase.com). In the next article, he will focus on retention and facility design.

