

BY THERESE IKNOIAN

What the industry needs to promote the role of physical activity is a non-profit fitness group, a **FITNESS INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION** exclusive to none and working for all, no matter what their role in the industry.

# allied front

▶ **FITNESS** for many unfortunately has an image developed primarily by the editors of women's magazines with their "fat-zapping" workouts, by the unrealistic covers of *Men's Health*, and by late-night infomercials touting exercise abracadabra. Why? One reason could be that fitness as an industry has no unified choir singing its attributes and benefits.

There are certainly lots out there humming their own tune, but the choir is nowhere to be found. Even without a unified voice, fitness gets lots of sound bites about how fat kids are and how out-of-shape America is getting, to which the answer is to get "moderate" workouts on "most days of the week." But what happens from there? Legislators try to find research to support bills. The media tries to cover the big picture and searches in vain for one person or group who can speak for the industry. And consumers are left somewhat befuddled about what the heck a "moderate" workout is, what "most days" means, and where they should go to buy or do workouts.

The reason? In contrast to other industries, the fitness industry lacks one non-profit association that speaks with a unified voice to America as a whole, to promote physical activity for all, while representing the fitness trade in its entirety. There is not one group that speaks for and represents every manufacturer, every retailer and every company or group related to the fitness industry, no matter what its special interest and no matter how large or small. Why not? Get ready for a harsh yet provocative question to ponder: Are the companies in the fitness industry mature enough to look beyond their own noses to see the broader good and the long-term gain?

"There is an incredible health crisis in the United States, and it's a crisis of opportunity," said Trek Bicycles President John Burke, also a member of the new President's Council on Physical Fitness. "There's a huge opportunity to get people involved in fitness, and I'm not sure anybody is doing anything about it...other than pushing their own products."

## "FITNESS INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION"

For want of a better name, we have chosen to call this non-existent trade group the "Fitness Industry Association," or FIA, only because

it's straight-forward: an association of those interested in the fitness industry, just as similar groups for other trades are called, for example, the Outdoor Industry Association (OIA) or the Snowsports Industry Association (SIA).

Try this mission statement on for size: "FIA is focused on efficiency, growth and success. From long-range consumer aggregation programs to real-time answers of member needs, we stand prepared. We are a fiscally-disciplined, future-focused group with only your interests in mind. Every day we analyze, chart and develop strategies to serve our industry. Creating new budget lines, supporting your company's operations or providing industry research to help your product projections, FIA is here to build the industry we all envision. Imagine the day when fitness participants are in excess, our industry enjoys consistent national media coverage, and your business runs like a machine. We can."

Sound good? Thank the Snowsports Industry Association ([www.thesnowtrade.org](http://www.thesnowtrade.org)) for this blurb, in which we just

changed industry references. But the goal is the same: To promote participation, gain positive media attention, and help your business.

"Associations bring a common value around being a good community citizen," said Frank Hugelmeyer, president of the Outdoor Industry Association, who's not only a former fitness buyer for Paragon Sports, but also the former vice president of sales and marketing for Bodyguard, both in the early '90s. "We have to rally around issues and values we all share. If the major retailers and manufacturers got together, they would find they have a lot of values in common in areas they do not compete in and could work together on."

Such an industry group wouldn't be just a pretty face (nor start a trade show, dare we add). Instead, it could get involved in government advocacy for key legislative issues or perhaps come up with its own, speak to the media and direct journalists to proper sources, promote consumer awareness of a lifestyle that includes physical activity, pro-

vide a platform for the now-unrepresented fitness retailers to talk to each other, support unbiased research, help educate retail staff, work with like-minded health-promotion groups, and negotiate simple business benefits for its members such as shipping, travel and health-care discounts.

**BENEFIT: LEGISLATIVE SUPPORT AND ADVOCACY**

! legislative



The fire seems to be heating up when it comes to awareness about impending dangers to the health-care system because of the risks associated with obesity and lack of physical activity. But a unified voice prodding at Washington, D.C., and at state legislatures would help move things along. Certainly IHRSA is a successful and large non-profit fitness association that is involved with lobbying, but it must rightfully focus on the interests of its membership—health clubs and their suppliers—as will its new Industry Growth Council. That naturally excludes many companies and means IHRSA’s promotional efforts are mostly focused on increasing club membership. Don’t get us wrong; the group does one superb job within its arena. But it doesn’t, and can’t, do it all. See our Report Card on page 36 in this GearTrends magazine for information about other groups, which are focused either on the broader sporting goods market, or on a special interest such as its own trade show or a niche commercial concern.

The Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association works hard on laudable issues such as PE4Life ([www.pe4life.org](http://www.pe4life.org)), which gives school grants from government funds, but the fitness industry as a whole hasn’t gotten too involved. Somehow, it seems to interpret the cause as one that’s about sports and not fitness. Oh so wrong, says PE4Life founder Jim Baugh, former president of Wilson Sporting Goods.

The issue is about getting kids moving in some way, so they learn what it feels like and to enjoy it. Active kids are more likely to turn into active adults. And active adults are the ones who buy home gyms, join health clubs and keep themselves outfitted with hand weights, stretch cords, balance boards, walking shoes and other equipment and accessories for their workouts.

“The fitness industry has the most to gain from this,” Baugh told GearTrends. “We’ve already lost a generation of kids, and I want to make sure that every kid has the chance to live a healthy lifestyle.”

Associations are more powerful legislatively and can also act as “watchdog groups” in D.C. watching for bills that can help or harm the business. Those bills aren’t

just ones about working out, but are also ones about international trade issues, duty rates, taxes, small business health issues, domestic work-related issues and labor laws—issues that mean a lot when it comes to doing business better.

**BENEFIT: MEDIA REPRESENTATION**

! MEDIA



The media like to find a spokesperson, someone who represents an industry and can give global viewpoints and overview statements about topics and trends. But that person can’t be from a manufacturer for fear of bias. We at GearTrends can speak to the frustration of trying to find one set of statistics, one voice or one big-picture statement for stories that isn’t tainted by any special interest, category or company’s products. It isn’t there. And without that, how the industry is represented in the media is up for grabs and out of the industry’s control.

“Looking to build stories around trends and research, and having an entity that is focused on communicating trends only increases the coverage,” said Hugelmeyer, of the Outdoor Industry Association ([www.outdoorindustry.org](http://www.outdoorindustry.org)). He says his office gets hundreds of calls with inquiries for broad-brush quotes, about how to find certain products or categories, or what businesses are in the caller’s area. The group can then direct the journalists to member companies—either nationally or locally—which gives those companies exposure, too.

Bottom line: Leaving journalists floundering and frustrated isn’t a good thing and doesn’t make for frequent or flattering stories.

**BENEFIT: CONSUMER AWARENESS AND ADVOCACY**

! awareness



So maybe any group won’t have the budget for a “got milk” campaign. That’s OK. Grassroots campaigns can be the answer. That’s where the likes of PE4Life, the President’s Council on Physical Fitness, the American College of Sports Medicine, and ACE’s Operation FitKids do their best work.

“No money” is the complaint most frequently heard about the reason for a lack of such a fitness group. Stop whining, says Burke, who hints at a President’s Council grassroots consumer awareness campaign that is in the

works and will be out this summer: “We don’t have any money, but who cares?” he asks. “Let’s focus on all the things we do have.”

Already, some opportunities have been missed to start the outcry against the growing epidemic of obesity and lack of activity. Northern Lights representative and motivational speaker Jhan Dolphin points to the 1996 Surgeon General’s report on physical activity—one that was called “historic” and was supposed to have the same effect on society’s habits as the one did in 1964 about smoking’s dangers. This report would, with its disturbing revelations of obesity trends, get people moving, get the industry banded together with one cause, and get government to bolster its promotion of activity.

“Improving health through physical activity is a key public health challenge that we must hasten to meet,” said David Satcher, M.D., then the outspoken CDC director. “The stakes are high, and the potential rewards are great....”

The report quickly slid to the bottom of the pile despite lots of empathetic head-shaking and appalled tongue-clucking.

“Gosh, it just died,” Dolphin said. “It needed people to get behind it.”

**BENEFIT: INDUSTRY DISCOUNTS AND NETWORKING**

! networking



The above is what goes on in the outside world. But an association like this becomes a focal point from within too. It can put on business meetings, do research to

be used by its mem-



bers, and negotiate huge discounts on all kinds of benefits. That can include group discounts on health plans, airlines, rental cars, liability insurance and shipping providers. The outdoor association, for example, gets its members a whopping 41-percent off FedEx Express deliveries, a discount so huge that even FedEx staffers double-take at it, GearTrends has found.

But what's one of the biggest expenses in fitness? Freight. Hugelmeier says a nationally organized freight rate could save suppliers and retailers 30 percent to 50 percent. Certainly, manufacturers are working to reduce those costs, he said, but "if they work collectively, the rates would be fantastic ... that they do not is a crime."

What about networking? Although some suppliers find some networking opportunities at other shows, and clubs have the IHRSA group, retailers are left with nothing. "Retailers need a group," said Mike Lyons, owner of the Fitness Outlet and Professional Fitness Concepts in the Chicago area. He says he'd join one like this. Now he belongs to no group whatsoever.

### SO WHAT'S THE HURDLE?

With the topic raised over and over—and all seemingly in support of it—what's the big hurdle?

"Part of the problem may be that we don't have a common goal," said Life Fitness President Kevin Grodzki. The goal "needs to become more comprehensive than just commercial interests or clubs; it must include the consumer side as well... Our goal as suppliers is to get more people on equipment, whether at home or at a club."

"We need an independent body to mobilize and motivate," he added. "It seems that everyone thinks it's a great idea, but then it becomes a case of, 'You first.'"

For example, at the CEO Forum held the last few years at the IHRSA International meeting in the spring, nearly every one speaks about the need for a unifying group. Every year, the talk. Every year, nothing. Some blame the lack of action on no one stepping forward to organize the mission. Others blame the lack of money. Yet others say that some companies volunteer to pitch in money, but the idea stalls when invariably a couple of others balk about giving startup dollars. A few broadly blame our society and corporate America. Whatever the reason, the whole concept dies.

"A lot of this is the symptom of corporate America," said PE4Life's Baugh. "We're always so busy looking quarter to quarter."

But some like Gym Source owner Richard Miller are even harsher: "The

industry is completely fragmented. Nobody's working together to get people to fitness. All these manufacturers are running after customers to sell them *their* stepper, *their* treadmill, *their* weight machines, and nobody is doing anything to bring more people into play."

### A PHOENIX IS BORN

Yet optimism persists. When we asked how far the industry stood from this possibility, nearly all named five or perhaps up to 10 years before it could become a reality.

"I believe we are at the very beginning of the process now," said Roland Murray, vice president of marketing at Cybex. "People are grasping onto the idea, and it will grow."


"Grow" is the key word in that phrase. Baugh said he started PE4Life a few years ago when the sporting goods industry was at a high point. All he did was call all the big guns into one room at The Super Show (Nike, Reebok, Head, Spalding, Russell, adidas and others), present his concept and ask for money without beating around the bush. He said the fitness industry must make haste to act in a similar manner while the industry is still growing.

Note, too, that a group like this imaginary "FIA" doesn't have to re-invent the wheel, but could indeed partner with others such as PE4Life, IHRSA, SGMA and even those outside the industry, such as nutrition groups or other recreational trades. Whether snowsports, bike or outdoor, any group that represents recreation (i.e. physical activity) is also looking at consumer outreach programs, the issue of obesity and its effect on the trade it represents, and at how to get people moving. Who cares how they move? If people move in some way, they will figure out they may want to try something different later too. The over-riding theme would be, simply, "Get Up, Get Moving," using in-your-face and long-term promotions much like the anti-smoking campaign has done so well in California. (See story, this page, to read more on that.)

Relying on any government or administration is short-sighted, observers say. Even running-enthusiast President Bush has talked a lot, but done very little.

"I'm so frustrated with the Bush administration," Baugh said. "He's the fittest president; yet he's only giving lip service. [Promoting fitness] should be one of his legacies."

Whether the legacy will come from the president is beside the point. Getting the choir to sing harmoniously is the real goal.

"If we could get together as an industry and speak with one voice," said Precor President Paul Byrne, "maybe people would understand." 

## ANTI-SMOKING AS ROLE MODEL:

### MAKE FITNESS THE NORM, NOT THE ODDBALL

It may seem strange to compare smoking to physical activity. Ah, not so. Smoking is a health risk that drives up health-care costs, whereas NOT being physically active is a health risk that also drives up costs. The goal of the anti-smoking campaign in California was to keep the message in front of the public and make it abnormal to smoke; the goal of a fitness campaign would be the same, but with the goal of making activity the norm.

The anti-smoking campaign knew it had a long-term campaign on its hands—a generation or some 10-15 years to truly change behaviors in youth. Here's what happened:

**The groundwork was laid** — The anti-smoking campaign in California worked for a decade before it had enough clout to get Proposition 99 passed in 1988.

**The money came in** — With Proposition 99, a 25-cent tax was added to every pack of cigarettes sold. From the funds, one dollar in every five was set aside for anti-tobacco education in schools and communities.

**Media campaigns were plotted** — Perhaps you've seen the TV ads or billboards that have slowly erased the glamour smoking used to have. On one billboard, a handsome man asks a gorgeous woman, "Mind if I smoke?" Her answer is, "Care if I die?"

Having funding was vital, said Anne Goure, director of grassroots and media advocacy for the American Cancer Society. That allowed those involved to write school lessons, train professionals, post billboards, and run ads that make smoking seem, well, yucky.

**And the results arrived** — According to a study in the American Journal of Public Health in 1995, a reduction in cigarette sales by 232 million packs from the third quarter of 1990 through the fourth quarter of 1992 was a direct result of the media campaign. Another report covering 1989 to 1993 found that the number of Californians who attempted to quit smoking for more than a day went up whenever the media campaign was in effect. Other surveys showed high percentages of 10th graders surveyed in 1996 and 1997 recalled seeing or hearing the ads and were more aware of the dangers of secondhand smoke.

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