

# » tricks of the trade

BY SHARON LEICHAM



Work merchandising magic on accessories with these

## 9 TIPS

**S**umming together the cumulative average sales growth for barbells, dumbbells, hand weights and free weights from 1987 to 2002, you get a 44-percent sales growth, according to the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association. That's a healthy figure—and one that doesn't even count exercise balls, weight gloves, stretch cords, jump ropes, balance boards and other fitness accessories.

Even though many specialty retailers say accessories only make up 2 percent to 10 percent of their total volume, they still add up to something to pay more attention to. If you're not seeing increases in accessory sales, maybe you should consider taking a look at how you promote and merchandise the products.

Here are nine tips for maximizing sales. We think you'll find a few you—and your bottom line—will like.

### 1. PRODUCT PLACEMENT

Good fitness stores consist of three major



PHOTO BY SHARON LEICHAM

Boxed or stacked products can be used between rows of equipment.

areas: the merchandising zone, the cash/wrap and displays. The merchandising zone is where equipment for sale is housed and customers are visually bombarded with equipment products available for purchase. The cash/wrap is where the final sale takes place and is an excellent area in or near which to sell small accessory items that appeal to impulse buying. Display spaces are used to cre-

ate visual excitement and draw attention to both accessories and equipment.

A defined accessory area on the wall is great as long as you also place some of those accessory items in displays on top of counters, near the register, on merchandise towers, on tables or in your front windows.

### 2. CROSS-MERCHANDISING

Display select accessories alongside your equipment. Place merchandise towers in the midst of your equipment sections and hang gloves, belts, straps, stretch tubes, water bottles and gym bags on them. This will remind customers that they also need to consider accessory purchases.

### 3. FIXTURING

The easiest way to stock accessories is on a slat or grid wall—and one that's not hidden behind equipment or the counter. Pegs hold hanging blister packs, and shelving accommodates boxed accessories. To add display space, place a couple of small rectangular metal tables near aisles and merchandise more of your boxed accessories on them. Or use merchandise towers from 20 to 24 inches square and 5 to 6 feet tall. Attach casters to the bottom for easy moving when you re-arrange.

### 4. SIGNAGE

In a larger store—or even just a really full one—customers may find it difficult to locate what they're looking for especially when it comes to smaller items. Even if you have a full complement of sales help, some customers prefer to browse before asking for



Fitter International offers this display to its retailers so they can show product well but take little space doing it.

assistance. So consider category signs over each of your equipment areas and one in your accessories space (or more if you want to segregate types). Hang them from the ceiling to save on floor space and use large easy-to-read lettering.



PHOTO BY SHARON LEICHPAM

Freestanding displays can be used effectively with explanatory signage adjacent to equipment.

In addition, use signs to give product information to help shoppers. The most effective signs are those that include the name of the item, its features and benefits, and the price.

Try featuring a different accessory item each month at the front of the store. Place the accessory item next to a sign saying something like “Accessory Buy of the Month.” If your local paper or favorite fitness magazine has run an article about one of the accessory products you carry—particularly the featured item—place that article in your display and even consider having extra copies available for customers.

## 5. VISUAL DISPLAY

If you carry a lot of equipment, a store can be overwhelming. If you have the space, create accessory display “rest stops” throughout the store to give customers a visual break. Here’s what we mean:

The first “rest stop” should be 10 feet inside the front entrance. Create a display combining a piece of equipment with appropriate accessories and maybe an article or two of clothing. Create another “rest stop” in the middle of the store and, if you have the space, you can create a third in the rear. Utilize the tops of cabinets for creating accessory displays.

Bring in props to enhance the looks of your displays. Roll and stack towels, put an equipment mat under the display piece, bring in a few bright bottles of water, and combine them with some accessory items.

## 6. LIGHTING

One word about lighting—use it (Oops, that’s two words!). People are drawn to areas of brighter light so highlight your accessory area with track or other lighting to sell more product (low-voltage MR-16’s are the best).

## 7. STAFF

There’s no substitute for good staff training. Just as you train your staff to sell equipment, make sure they are as adept at selling accessories. Your sales staff should suggest accessories to EVERY customer, especially once the sale of a large equipment piece is closed. Won’t the customer need mats? How about instruction books or heart-rate monitors? Guess what, you have them in stock to sell.



PHOTO BY SHARON LEICHPAM

Vendor-supplied accessory wall displays can be effective.

## 8. DEMOS

On weekends, invite fitness trainers or sales staff to demo some of the accessory items you carry like balance boards, Swiss balls, stretch bands or some particularly new fitness item. Let your customers know about special demonstrations by sending out postcards, or posting fliers in local gyms as well as in the store. Use the opportunity to run special pricing on the accessories being demo’ed.

## 9. THE FEMALE CUSTOMER

Research compiled by the National Sporting Goods Association reports that 52 percent of fitness equipment purchases are made by women. Does your store appeal to the female customer? Do you know what makes a store female-friendly? For example, women like to read about products before they buy. They are time-restrained so they want to be able to find what they’re looking for quickly and easily. Since they are big users of exercise accessories, try these simple suggestions:

Use informational signage to sell the *benefits*, not just the features, of the accessory products. Don’t stack or hang accessories higher than 8 feet. Use signage to make it easy for them to find the accessory area and organize it so it’s easy to pick up something and read a box. Include a small selection of exercise books and videos in your accessory section.

Accessories carry attractive margins, take up less space and turn more times than equipment. So even though your accessory category may not be a large part of your business, a little attention can turn it into a profit center. Besides, accessories add visual excitement, color and interest to any fitness store.

## MINDING MIND-BODY

Mind-body practices—such as yoga, Tai Chi and Pilates—aren’t just for the granola-crunching types of yore. More mainstream exercisers, men and women, take part in these practices in clubs and at home. For that, they need accessories—product that can be merchandised next to more traditional equipment like treadmills since these routines often supplement other workouts, and participants need their own gear—from “sticky mats,” to blocks, straps, balls, wedges, plus specialized Pilates equipment.

From 1998 to 2002, SGMA shows a 94.6-percent increase in yoga/Tai Chi participants. Note, too, an average household income of \$65,500. American Sports Data showed Pilates as THE top-growth activity with a 40-percent leap to 2.4 million participants from 2000 to 2002. IDEA, which surveys club/studio programming, also found Pilates was THE biggest-growth program—53-percent jump from 1997 to 2002—while yoga showed a 31-percent jump. The beauty? This gear doesn’t take much space but can add consistent sales.

—Therese Iknoian