



making the grade

BY DAVID FERRIS

Our report card on what your trade associations and non-profits are doing to help the industry, inside and out.

IF ONE THING unites the fitness industry, it's the desire to be taken more seriously. While many on *The Inside* see themselves as the ones responsible for improving the nation's health and well-being, even more on *The Outside* think the industry is just about big muscles and a quick buck.

Luckily for suppliers and retailers—not to mention fitness consumers and the general public—a few organizations are picking up the pace in their efforts not only to raise the bar on what they do for the industry on the inside, but also to raise the level of awareness about fitness and its merits to legislators and consumers. As a young industry, it needs all the help economically, academically and politically it can get.

Each of these seven is working in its own way to make the industry something everyone can trust. Some encourage exercise among the inactive, while others encourage politicians to build fitness incentives into the nation's laws. Fitness certification agencies are improving the rep of instructors and trainers by making certifications more rigorous and specialized, which in turn builds trust in fitness among consumers. Still others promote research with the medical community. Without one overriding non-profit association for the industry as a whole, however, efforts seem to be divided with each group doing its best to mostly represent its own constituency of clubs, suppliers, retailers, trainers, sports medicine professionals or consumers, with little effort so far to speak collectively to *The Outside*.

But why should suppliers and retailers care about well-educated personal trainers, exercise prescriptions from doctors or tax breaks for those who go to the gym? Does any of that help their bottom line? The answer is a resounding yes. The organizations profiled here have realized that one player's credibility builds on another's. And when "fitness" gains currency, so does equipment and accessories—and those who make and sell them.

"The more people are exercising, the more they will purchase shoes, equipment, a gym membership," said IDEA Executive Director Peter Davis. "It will touch every aspect of the industry."

The beginning of collaboration among fitness advocates has scored some early successes in Washington, D.C., and is poised to produce far more. Heck, even the commander-in-chief has installed a treadmill on Air Force One. Lobbying by fitness groups has scored a major victory in the last two years as money available for the Carol M. White Physical Education for Progress (PEP) program has skyrocketed. Funding grew from \$5 million in 2001 to \$50 million in 2002 and \$60 million expected in 2003. Think PE has nothing to do with fitness? Think again. A kid who knows how to and learns to enjoy moving his or her body becomes an adult who does the same. Count on it, research shows.

Although all these players are still mostly shouting from different corners of the field, we think the seeds are there to bring them together so they can speak with one voice.

IHRSA«

International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association

As the largest representative of health clubs in the world, IHRSA wants to get as many people active as possible—with the emphasis on most of it being in a health club or gym. "The obstacle that has to be tackled first is just exercise adoption and adherence in general," said spokesman Bill Howland. "Our ultimate goal is more members, which means more clubs and, for suppliers, means more business."

The non-profit association's "100 million by 2010" campaign has the goal of increasing U.S. gym membership to 50 million by, yes, 2010—currently there are 36.3 million U.S. members, with the balance of membership coming globally. To get there, IHRSA says it will support any program that gets people working out, even if that means playing team sports or walking the treadmill at home.

Members came to Capitol Hill in May for IHRSA's first legislative summit. Leading the agenda was a bill IHRSA wrote itself—the Workforce Health Improvement Program Act (known as WHIP), which would allow companies to write off any subsidies they give to employees for health club dues, just as companies currently do that have fitness facilities on-site. The bill would also reduce the tax hit for employees by no longer counting such benefits as compensation.

IHRSA is also a leading supporter of the PEP (Physical Education for Progress bill)

with both cash and lobbying efforts. It also supports the Improved Nutrition and Physical Activity (IMPACT) Act, which gives grants to state and local governments to work with business to get the workforce more active and eating better, as well as other monies to encourage school health programs to focus on a balanced diet and regular physical activity. On the state level, IHRSA is trying to fend off state legislatures' efforts to tax health-club dues.

IHRSA is also working with the nation's leading fitness certification agencies to create minimum standards for development and administration of exams. Finally, it is in the early stages of creating a so-called Industry Growth Council, whose efforts will be on getting more people in the front doors of gyms and keeping them there. www.ihrsa.org

GT VIEW: With a large membership and a growing trade show, IHRSA is in a position to work with more fervor than most on more fronts than others. We like what the group is doing. Very much. Unfortunately, however, because of its membership and mission, it understandably must always put health club membership in front of all else. And although we support clubs, we don't believe clubs are for everyone.

IDEA«

The Association of Fitness Professionals

IDEA's core membership is trainers, aerobics instructors and club managers, but it envisions an influence far wider. Executive Director Peter Davis wants fitness to be taken more seriously by everyone—gymgoers, couch potatoes and, hardest of all, medical professionals such as chiropractors, nurses and doctors. While these groups know a great deal about health, Davis says, they aren't necessarily experts on exercise and nutrition. IDEA wants to recruit them to the fitness cause, and wants to become their source of information—although it hasn't yet figured out exactly how.

With its membership flat for several years at 19,000, IDEA nevertheless hopes to double membership in the next five years through its new "Inspire the World to Fitness" campaign. It says it will do so largely through its four niche magazines for fitness professionals as well as through several annual conferences. IDEA, a for-profit group, is banking on the enthusiasm of its own members to get people off the couch. Davis notes the increasing seriousness with which fitness novices seek out a professional's advice. "Our members are what we call 'the influencers,'" Davis said. "Their influence is in terms of what products or services they think are best for their clients. They have almost replaced medical doctors and other health professionals

as a source of referrals." www.ideafit.com

GT VIEW: The organization needs an infusion to get where it dreams it can be. Taking its own sphere of influence beyond its core of trainers, instructors and club managers could alienate it from that very constituency that has come to trust it and turn to it for some great education.

SGMA«

Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association

The Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association (SGMA) is the largest representation of equipment manufacturers of all kinds, with the largest portion of its membership being non-fitness equipment with the likes of bats, balls, pool toys and ballet shoes. Although it pulled back a bit a few years ago as its show, The Super Show, declined in attendance—down some 20 percent—and that therefore meant fewer funds for grants and other committee activities, it still remains one of the broader sporting goods industry's strongest voices in Washington, D.C. It shares office space with the non-profit group PE4Life, which spearheaded lobbying for the PEP bill.

While SGMA, a for-profit trade group, claims to be the largest fitness trade organization in terms of both number of members and dollar volume, its membership of 1,500 is flat after a peak in the mid-90s. SGMA spokesman Mike May said both developments reveal, not a lack of interest, but a wave of industry consolidation that has reduced the number of fitness firms, even as storefronts across the country multiply. SGMA is also sensing greater competition from other trade shows, such as MAGIC, World Footwear Association (WSA), Outdoor Retailer (OR), and the Health & Fitness Business Expo. www.sgma.com

GT VIEW: The SGMA does a superior job with the sporting goods arena, but it has struggled since the mid-90s to try to regain its strength in the specialty fitness and specialty outdoor arenas. We're not sure that is on the horizon, and we're not sure the group should try. If it focused on PE and sporting goods—and lobbying and advocacy efforts related to that—it could be stronger through less dilution of its efforts.

NSGA«

National Sporting Goods Association

This representative of sporting-goods dealers and retailers continues to advocate PEP as a means of getting kids off their butts and, through that, more sporting goods off the shelves. A for-profit group, NSGA hasn't been growing and in fact may be struggling

to hold its own. Still, spokesman Larry Weindruch says the number of storefronts represented by NSGA is up, to 22,000. According to 1997 Department of Commerce census information (the latest available), there are 30,000 total stores specializing in exercise, athletic goods, sporting goods, or athletic footwear or some kind, with some 2,800 being fitness specialty and nearly 7,500 being full-line stores. NSGA's real value, it seems, is its constant research on the buying and sporting habits of the consumer that it undertakes and interprets. Its Management Conference & Team Dealer Summit held in May has grown bigger year by year and now has a waiting list. www.nsga.org

GT VIEW: The NSGA will never be a huge force in the fitness industry, but it still has value to dealers as a voice and source of research.

ACE«

American Council on Exercise

The American Council on Exercise (ACE) began its life as merely a certification group for group-exercise instructors, as the non-profit arm of IDEA. But it broke out on its own many years ago and struggled to find its niche. Now? Still certifying, but it has beefed up the promotion of its role among national media and consumers as an industry watchdog, barking at the sight of bogus home-exercise equipment and not being afraid to name names and point fingers. In mid-2002, the Federal Trade Commission issued an injunction against several makers of electrical-muscle-stimulation abdominal belts, such as the AbTronic, that promised six-pack abs without exercise. An ACE-sponsored study of the devices aided in the government's crackdown.

"When we make the end-consumer more educated and informed with regard to exercise, it should only benefit those on the supplier side," said Cedric Bryant, vice president of educational services. "It will help uncover some of the products that don't provide a real benefit, which longer term will help the supplier by eliminating the schlocky products. It will enhance the credibility of the entire industry."

The self-proclaimed "America's Authority on Fitness" also disseminates reliable information and research about fitness to its members, with more of an emphasis of late on getting that information to consumers, using not only its redesigned website, but also magazines and videos. www.acefitness.org

GT VIEW: We see ACE as following in the footsteps of the Nutrition Action

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