



BY MARTHA SCHINDLER CONNORS

U measuring UP

Just doing it" isn't doing it anymore. These days, consumers feel the need to track, clock, log and plot every aspect of their fitness plans, using devices that measure everything from heart rate, blood pressure, calories and body fat to speed, distance and intensity of their efforts.

Maybe we're hungry for information, eagerly taking every bit of data we can get and using it to assess and re-assess our progress, be it in weight loss, health or performance. Maybe we're seeking validation, using electronic scorecards to prove we're working out (and working out hard enough). Perhaps it's our love affair with fancy toys in this techno-age of always being wired and ready to plug-n-play. Whatever the reason, your customers—or somebody's customers and we hope they are yours too—are gobbling up these gadgets almost as quickly as manufacturers can invent, manufacture and market them.

"This market is really hot, and it's far from being saturated," said Alan Antin, vice president of marketing for Polar, the marketers of heart rate monitors that do much more these days than just monitor your ticker. "We see this category as one that will continue to grow. More and more competitors are coming in, and that shows that this is definitely an area of opportunity."

Indeed, the demand for all-things-that-measure is enormous, he added. "It started with devices for the world-class professional or Olympic athlete, but has really worked its way down to the average exercise enthusiast—and it will continue to do so," he said.

IT STARTED WITH THE HEART

Despite the fact that heart rate monitoring is nothing new—it's been around for decades and has been part of the popular fitness vernacular for at least a decade—the demand shows no signs of fatigue. Even as global giants like Nike and Apple Computer, with their Nike+ iPod collaboration, grab up a huge share of the market,

PHOTO COURTESY OF ACCUFITNESS



AccuFitness' MyoTape body measurement tape

◀ Polar's AW200 Activity Watch measures velocity and calorie expenditure

manufacturers like Polar are finding plenty of customers, as well, especially as its partnership with adidas becomes reality. Certainly, manufacturers by the handful have jumped on the heart rate bandwagon since the days when Polar dominated a couple of decades ago. With the wide variety of choices consumers now have in features, designs and price points, and the competition Polar has acquired, the market for heart rate monitors and other fitness-measuring devices remains lucrative.

Heart rate monitors now include the traditional chest-strap models as well as strap-free versions, which use sensors on the watch's face (users place two fingers on



▲ Apex Fitness' Bodybugg is a calorie-expenditure-tracking device

▶ No longer content with tracking heart rates, today's high-tech gadgets *measure just about any aspect* of a human's workout.



◀ Tanita's InnerScan Body Composition Monitor

that works well, but they also want an instrument that's comfortable and stylish." To this end, Highgear as a company has focused on products with sleek designs that look a whole lot better than the clunky and purely utilitarian sport watches of years past.

Finnish manufacturer Suunto also is looking at the fashion-minded fitness buff with its entry last year into the heart rate monitor category to its focus on wrist-top computers. Its model t1 heart rate monitor watch (\$99), for example, comes in several stylish colors, including coral, olive, sand, espresso and brick. And priming for its debut in July is a watch designed specifically for women. Although Suunto's Lauren Wilson said the details are still hush-hush, she said it is a truly useable watch loaded with features, but finally has the look and feel women will prefer. "We didn't take a man's watch and just change the color and make it smaller," she said. "The watch can be worn in a variety of ways that fit in with a woman's sports and lifestyle and also appeals to her sense of fashion."

Part of the allure of these products and their style, no doubt, is the wow factor. Who wouldn't love to have a James Bond-style wristwatch that tracks heartbeats, calories and miles even as it (ho hum) tells the time? Especially if it doesn't take an engineer to operate it. Indeed, Polar's latest innovation launching in June is called the Activity Watch (AW200, \$200) and is the company's first piece that doesn't have a

heart rate monitoring feature. It measures an exerciser's movements, calculating the intensity using sensors that register velocity and a sophisticated set of algorithms that convert the information into estimated caloric expenditure. In addition to counting calories, showing a user's so-called activity zone, time exercising and steps taken, it also has an altimeter and barometer so a user can track the weather, altitude and elevation profile of his or her route.

"It's designed for people who do a combination of structured and non-structured activities," said Antin. "We know that losing weight is a key reason for many people to work out—and we also know that many people want to track their activities as closely as they can so that they can get as much as they can out of everything they do." These people might not care about their heart rate, but they really care about how much exercise they're getting and what that exercise is doing for them.

But Polar is by no means the only company producing devices your customers will find drool-worthy. With the growing global focus on weight loss, more gizmos like the Activity Watch are appearing that count and track calories by perching on an arm or waist—and they're getting tinier. For example, there's the Bodybugg (\$399, with an online and phone coaching program, www.bodybugg.com). At the FIBO fitness show in Germany in April 2007, Bodybugg's new sister called the SenseWear was said to be the first scientifically validated device to measure metabolic output and was a finalist for the show's Innovation Award. Sensewear is for the health care and medical

the sensors to measure their pulse). While these models might be slightly less accurate than the original (you may have to stop exercising to take a reading, slow down or take off gloves), they're still popular, with makers including Mio, Salutron, Sportline and Highgear. For example, the New Balance HRT Max watch (\$85) by Highgear is both sleek and functional, offering an easy-to-read face with a colored "in zone" display. "The watch appeals to someone who wants on-demand heart rate information in a good-looking package," said Mike Hosey, president of Highgear.

HIGH TECH MEETS HIGH STYLE

Back when Polar dominated, it was all about function. Monitors were square, big and mostly black. Times have changed, though, with more competition and an eye on the broader market. "People want information about how they're doing workout-wise," said Hosey. "They want something



industry and does not include food logging.

Various companies have created motion sensors that measure body movement and calculate the calories users are burning, but have had mixed commercial success. The measurements these devices offer are still estimates and accuracy can vary—leaving some consumers discouraged if they see low readout numbers. But once the technology advances enough, as it is now, and people get savvier about their bodies, there will be more successes.

“Consumers need to understand that calories burned through physical activity amount to roughly 25 percent of one’s total consumption. Metabolic calorie burn is generated through our functioning central nervous systems and by doing things like simply breathing represents the majority of calories burned,” said Dan Kinsbourne, vice president of marketing for Sportline, a major supplier of pedometers and heart rate monitors. “My perspective is this: Whatever you accomplished today, try to do a little better



AccuFitness FatTrack Pro

tomorrow. Use a personal fitness monitor to keep track and you’ll be on your way.”

The Bodybugg, launched by Apex Fitness in 2005, has been sold to more than 32,000 people worldwide, most of them in the United States, said Christie Renick, web communications specialist at Apex. Marketed as the most accurate non-clinical calorie-expenditure-tracking device on the market today, the system has two components: an armband and a web interface. The Bodybugg armband uses four separate sensors, including an accelerometer (motion sensor) and a heat flux sensor that determines how much heat the user’s body is giving off, to collect the physical data with 92 percent accuracy. The web interface gives users the choice of logging their meals or using the automated program that calculates their actual average calorie consumption based on the information from the armband and the user’s personal data.

Still, counting calories with the emphasis these days on how fat we as a country are won’t ever fade to dark. And it’s not limited to things you wear: Tanita has the HealthyJump Jump Rope (\$20), which counts calories as it spins.

TAKING IT UP A NOTCH

But although smaller is good and sleek sells, larger packages that do everything except the laundry (darn) still sell. From Timex’s BodyLink and Speed+Distance systems to Garmin’s Forerunner 305, companies also pack measuring and monitoring into devices to keep the exercise elite that wander into your shops happily data-cized and can run a few hundred, depending on components. For example, Suunto offers its X9i watch (\$499), which incorporates altimeter, barometer, compass—and the lightest and smallest GPS device on the market. “The cool thing is that it’s compatible with Google Earth,” said Wilson. “You can see your own tracks and zoom in on where you’ve been.” Equally cool is Suunto’s G6 golfer’s watch (\$399 to \$499), with features any techno-duffer customer would kill for: It measures the tempo, rhythm, angle and velocity of every swing, then lets the user analyze his or her round with included software to figure out how to get that handicap down.

Meanwhile, devices that measure vital statistics such as weight and fat are also popular. For example, Tanita, which led the charge of fat monitoring 11 years ago with the introduction of its first body composition scale, continues to see growth. Its latest innovation: the BC558 Segmental and Full Body Composition Monitor (\$299) has nine readings in all, measuring factors like body fat, hydration status, muscle mass and bone mass and then breaks down all this information for five separate body segments (trunk, legs and arms). As if that weren’t enough, your customer can then determine how fit (or fat) a particular section of the body is. It also tells users their metabolic age and, in case you’re feeling retro, your weight. “This is great for someone who’s trying to target a specific body zone,” said Beth Mackey, Tanita’s marketing director, “but it’s also great for rehabbing a particular area or building strength.” Tanita’s scales come in a wide range of models and prices—its first scale



◀ Suunto’s t1 heart rate monitor watch

11 years ago cost \$300, while a base model today goes for \$40—and can make a perfect add-on sale for buyers of strength or cardio equipment to track progress.

SIMPLE SELLS, TOO

Despite the popularity of these sophisticated electronics, it’s not all about bells and whistles: Consumers looking to track their fitness are buying plenty of lower-tech devices, too. For example, pedometers like those from Accusplit, which retail for roughly \$13 to \$40, are consistently good sellers, said Dave Gilbert, product manager for Accusplit. These devices can hold their own against their space-age brethren because they deliver the same kind of performance. “A lot of it comes down to quality,” he said. In recent years, he said, mass retailers started carrying inferior pedometers and fast-food restaurants even gave away the cheap-o ones, which might have left some consumers feeling cheated and burned (and believing pedometers don’t really work). But despite this, Gilbert said, Accusplit has seen renewed sales through its core fitness retailers. “We’ve found that there’s been a movement back toward buying better products, which is good for us. We’ve gotten lots of traction from placing high-quality products with high-quality retailers.”

Other manufacturers are seeing success with even simpler products. “We’ve been in business for 10 years, and our business continues to increase every year,” said Matt Chalek, president of AccuFitness, which manufactures tape measures and body fat calipers. “These days, most people who exercise understand that body fat is more important than body weight,” he said. For that reason, he said, AccuFitness can position its products alongside the pricier electronics—and watch them sell out. “With all of the consumer education that’s going on regarding body fat and health, we can ride the coattails of the rest of the fitness industry,” he explained.

USER EDUCATION IS KEY

Indeed, much of the success of these devices can be traced to a general enlightenment regarding fitness that’s been spreading since the 1980s. Since then, consumers have gotten increasingly wiser to the fact that there’s more to being fit and healthy than having a low body weight or being able to jog for more than 10 minutes straight. As consumers hear more about the importance of measuring, plotting, logging and clocking their personal vitals, manufacturers find new methods to offer smaller and simpler packages that allow specialty



WEB EXTRA! To read more about a new device out of Finland, not even in the U.S. market yet, which measures the impact of a user’s exercise and if it’s enough for healthy bones, an added benefit for SNEWS® subscribers, go to www.geartrends.com/extras.

retailers to also educate their customers.

"Education is definitely important in our business," said Tanita's Mackey. "People ask, 'Does it matter how much fat I have? And if so, do I need to pay attention to it? Why do I need to replace my 20-year-old bathroom scale when it works just fine?' I tell people that it's important for your overall health as well as your fitness to monitor your body fat—and your visceral fat and hydration levels, all of the things that our scales can measure for you."

Just a few years ago, the biggest market for fitness monitoring devices was elite athletes, but these days it's the average consumer—the folks who wander into retail shops to peruse yoga mats, try out home gyms or consider stationary bikes or treadmills for their homes. Most manufacturers know they need to take advantage of constantly evolving technology while still delivering easier-to-use goods. "Right now, we're really focusing on the general fitness and training market. People who want to get into better shape or lose weight," said Wilson of Suunto. "We're creating products that give consumers the information they want—without requiring you to be a rocket scientist to use them."

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

And while it's anyone's guess what the latest George Jetson-esque devices will be, observers see a few trends emerging.

"People want things that are easy to use," said Antin of Polar. "We know that many consumers don't like to wear a chest strap (with their heart rate monitor), but they want the accuracy. So we're working on developing smart garments, which address that issue in a more elegant way." Smart garments employ built-in sensors, meaning a consumer can get an accurate heart rate measurement simply by wearing a "smart" shirt or running bra—no chest strap required.

Highgear is also developing smart garments, said Hosey. The company is working with New Balance to develop a modular system similar to the Nike+iPod arrangement and Polar's cooperative effort with adidas. New Balance's version will have a shoe pod transmitter and a heart rate transmitter in a fabric chest strap that will communicate data to the user's wristwatch. Look for it late next year, Hosey said.


As people become accustomed to having information at their fingertips that is easy to access and to understand, devices that



measure and track will need to adapt. Instruments like these are "the keepers of information," said Hosey. "People love it—and the more information, the better."

Experts also agree that multi-function devices are likely to continue to grab market share, as are gadgets with built-in computers that can analyze the data they collect and then allow a user to download it to review, save and compare. "Basically, everything is getting lighter and smaller—and smarter," said Antin.

With successes and failures, the market for gadgets is still going nowhere but up. "We are living in an age where people are used to receiving more information than ever before, including data on their own bodies and activities," said Sportline's Kinsbourne. "And we have found that people at all fitness levels find this kind of information very motivating."

Today's devices let people set personal goals and get real-time feedback on their progress toward those goals, he said. "And that's where the motivation lies." 

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