



SNEWS® FITNESS 2007

► RETAILER SURVEY

AFTER FIVE YEARS, OUR INDEPENDENT SURVEY IS STILL GATHERING STEAM—AND VEHEMENT, EMOTIONAL, UNCENSORED OPINIONS.



► **Celebrating an astounding five years, the SNEWS® Retailer Survey** really lit its candles this year by bringing in a remarkable 45 percent return rate of the specialty dealers contacted. When nearly half of all the retailers contacted want to take the time to tell you what they think, we know these are thoughts that they really want to share and need to be aired. Since it is the only independent survey that isn't in any way connected to, commissioned by, done by or influenced in any way by a manufacturer, the retailers speak their minds. And we listen. We hope you do too, since we have raked in thoughts and votes from stores that represent several hundred doors and multi-millions of dollars in sales, cumulatively. Remember, only one survey (and one vote) is allowed per store brand, whether it is one store, has a dozen doors, or more. Remember too that these votes are not influenced by SNEWS® or GearTrends® by offering lists of names from which retailers choose; rather, we ask a question and let the respondent write-in his or her vote. We don't or won't ever call this scientific—heck, we're writers, not statistician geeks with antique slide rules in our desk drawers—but nonetheless the vote tallies and opinions expressed are a good barometer of what the specialty retail world has on its mind.

And, hey, we aren't naïve—we recognize that the survey has become important enough to some suppliers that a few ask their retailers to cast a ballot in their favor, or that some retailers may cast a ballot in favor of their A-list suppliers and equipment as a return favor. Nevertheless, we know most of the answers are pretty honest and come from the heart based on accompanying comments that are written-in as explanation. Like much of what we do here at SNEWS® and GearTrends®, the survey is a learning tool for suppliers—don't ignore the voices and votes since they mean what they say and say what they mean. Despite that, our goal is not to point a bony finger at anyone and cackle in glee if they do or don't do so well. We just want the entire industry to listen to what's happening on the front lines so all suppliers can take the opinions into the board rooms to improve their business, and all retailers can realize they aren't alone in what they are experiencing. If discussion and debate ensues, we say, "Hoorah!"

Our methodology: At the end of March we sent emails to our long list of retailers around the country, big and small, new and well-established, in small towns and in the biggest cities. We asked them to go to a secure website and take the survey during April, and specifically noted we were looking for comments and votes pertaining to the previous calendar year. For laggards, we sent a couple of reminders during the month. With a fifth year under its belt, the survey now has some excellent comparative data too. We'll draw a few comparisons in our analysis of questions, but if you want to take a look at past surveys, go to www.gearrends.com/magazines to find all the past editions to download (assuming you don't have your own rack of archival editions). Note, however, that starting last year we only put a summary in the magazines, which includes the highly read answers to "best" supplier and "most difficult" supplier. If you want to see the rest of the story, as they say, that is housed on SNEWS® (www.snewsnet.com/surveys). One final note: If you as a retailer were not surveyed this year and want your vote to count next year or, as a reader, just want to send along a comment or question, drop us a note at survey@snewsnet.com.

For a summary look at some of the cheers and jeers from retailers this year, flip to page 44 and read on »»»»

THE FINE PRINT » All answers have been rounded up to the nearest 0.5 percent, and since we don't name every single company name or category with a percent, the percentages may not total 100 percent.

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IN YOUR OPINION, WHO IS THE "BEST" SUPPLIER IN THE BUSINESS? ▼

Octane Fitness	15%*
Vision Fitness	15%*
Precor	12.5%
Hoist	7.5%
Body-Solid	6.3%
Life Fitness	5%*
PaceMaster	5%*

 Others receiving votes (in alphabetical order): Bodycraft, Bodyguard, Cybex, Hampton, Horizon, Humane, Inspire, Kettler, Landice, Lifecore, Spirit, SportsArt, True Fitness, TuffStuff, Tunturi, Vectra.

*Tied companies are listed alphabetically with order not indicating any differences in ranking.


We again saw a lot more significant changes among those deemed "best," which will mean celebrations in a couple of headquarters and a few groans in others. Vision kept the No. 1 spot it attained for the first time last year after a creep to the top over the last few years, but ... wait ... it's not alone! Octane must be doing something right even as it has grown so strongly in the last couple of years and, this year, actually gave Vision such a tight run that they came in neck and neck at the tape. Precor still had a strong second-place showing, but take a look at third and fourth place: What do we have here?!? Hoist Fitness, which usually has garnered a few points, but not enough for a top six placement, suddenly sprang into place behind Precor. And Body-Solid, also a company that is a steady mid-packer, leaped with gusto into the top ranks right behind it. In fifth place we had another tie, making our top-five list into a top-seven one with two sets of ties: Nipping the tape together were Life Fitness and PaceMaster (a.k.a. Aerobics Inc.). For Life Fitness, this means a significant slip from last year's third place when it garnered double the percentage compared to this year; for PaceMaster, it's status quo but a great place to be hanging out for such a small company in relationship to its comrades. So who's missing? True has been slipping steadily in the last few years and, this year, dropped down into the list of also-rans. Certainly, the company has had a number of shifts in the top ranks in the last few years, but we can't say yet which came first, the chicken or the egg, so to speak (i.e. management shifts or a drop out of "best" placement). Interestingly, we had 23 companies earn at least one vote, compared to 20 last year and 16 the year before, so are more companies doing decent jobs, or are there just

more companies overall, which is spreading out the votes?

Now, what are the retailers saying? Over and over, they named suppliers for reasons that invariably came down to service and listening, not necessarily for the deepest product lines, delivery without any flaws, or even a product that garnered the most awards. For example, one retailer said, "Vision Fitness is still great, BUT it is currently experiencing QC issues, ... yet they aim to please and are ALWAYS available to discuss any issues." We'd say that's a vote of confidence. Octane consistently earned mentions for great sales training, high-quality customer service and being just plain easy to deal with. Shoot, even trying hard wins points. As one retailer said about Horizon: "Horizon is constantly improving their line and tries extremely hard in regards to solving issues and involving dealers to get better." Isn't that what it's all about in the end? Building a business together and getting better—together.

WHICH SUPPLIER DO YOU CONSIDER THE "MOST DIFFICULT" TO WORK WITH? ▼

Nautilus	40.3%
N/A or decline comment	10.4%
Keys Fitness	7.5%*
Life Fitness	7.5%*
Horizon	4.5%

 Others receiving votes (in alphabetical order): Bladex, Body-Solid, Cap, Cybex, Diamondback, Hoist, Icon, Landice, Quantum, Powertec, Precor, Spirit, SportsArt, TuffStuff, Vision, York.

*Tied companies are listed alphabetically with order not indicating any differences in ranking.

Well, our "winner" last year again took the top spot in a division where nobody but nobody wants to be No.1. No quibbles about a close vote or incorrect math here. Nautilus as a company, including all its brands, was a runaway top placement for the second year in a row, although it maintained about the same percentage as last year. We must add that we did have comments from those who named Nautilus citing a real effort of late to improve. For example: "In all fairness, (Nautilus is) putting in great efforts in trying to correct ... problems." Although we don't offer a "no comment" as a vote choice, some respondents this year realized that instead of writing in a company name, they could simply write N/A or some other indication of declining to name a supplier in the blank. That meant our second-place spot was taken over by all those wimps (yeah, we call it as it is) or those who didn't

want to commit for one reason or another (one respondent just said all suppliers were bad; another said his business declines to work with suppliers who are a pain to work with—"We have stopped doing business with anyone who is hard to work with. Too many other lines available to deal with a difficult vendor."). The second company named, however, was Keys Fitness, in a place it gained last year. This year, Keys was not alone, as Life Fitness actually moved higher on a list where higher isn't a reason to celebrate. So, the question remains, did Keys get better or did Life Fitness slip? In Keys' case, we heard complaints about the company not responding or being way too slow or simply not believing a retail customer. In Life Fitness' case, which could apply to other large companies, but may not in all cases—"I strongly believe that companies should stay humble and helpful even as they're becoming these giants in the fitness industry." The company in the next place catches the eye too: Horizon Fitness is growing like gangbusters and even gained some strong comments as a "best" supplier, but STILL managed some sock-it-in-the-gut comments and votes here, with one respondent, for example, picking on slow response time. Remember, we poll only specialty dealers and they are all very sensitive to brands that sell to them and the big-box stores if the brand seems to be burning them in the process. We can't speak to Horizon's issues, but that's a point to ponder.

Reading between the lines, you can see that respondents are posing an important question to suppliers: Can sincerity and communication be so hard? Retailers just want someone nice and trustworthy to deal with and one who is there for them. As one pleaded to us about Nautilus: "Please have them answer the phone!"

Where Are the Full Survey Results?

» To read all the results of the 2007 SNEWS® Fitness Retailer Survey—including more detailed analysis compared to the summary results printed here, as well as all the best-selling brand results—go to www.snewsnet.com/surveys. Yes, you must be a subscriber to read the full results, and if you are not yet, simply go to www.snewsnet.com/subscribe. If you are a salesperson (and not a manager, store owner, store buyer or part of the retail executive team) for a fitness specialty retail store, you can qualify for a free SNEWS® subscription under our retail staff program by going to www.snewsnet.com/freeretail/GTmag07.html—your free, one-year, limited-access subscription is but a click away. 