



## Servicing Tech-Savvy Clients Indoors And Outdoors Mar 1, 2005 12:00 PM

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**In our industry**, like many others, we can often become myopic about our businesses, client beliefs and other relevant information. As business owners and decision makers, we can get so stuck in the detail of our own industry that we miss the larger trends that might help us re-direct or transform our businesses. A great example of successful trend watching is illustrated by Apple Computers. The company's research team regularly goes into the field to talk with consumers, thought leaders, even teenagers to "get smart" about upcoming trends and potential customer needs. The results are exemplified by the huge success of Apple's most recent products including the iPod mini, the iPod shuffle and, most recently, Apple's \$499 mini-computer. At last report the iPod shuffle, which was introduced just last month, was back ordered for six weeks. In short, Apple and others are responding to how potential customers are truly using technology and are filling in what is missing from the current offerings. Incidentally, how many of your members have you seen sporting their iPods while working out in the past two years?

This weekend I attended one of the largest conferences anywhere in the country — the Outdoor Retailer Show in Salt Lake City, UT. This show attracts 750 vendors and close to 17,000 attendees. Products range from kayaks to skis, monitoring devices, even technical fabrics worn indoors and out. The industry itself creates annual revenues in excess of \$5 billion.

Closer to home, although formal statistics do not exist, my interviews with the leadership of the Outdoor Retail Association suggest that almost 65 percent of outdoor retail customers also hold a health club membership. Research from REI, a thriving national outdoor retailer, also suggests that buyers are increasingly looking for a broad range of technical products that can be used across the fitness and recreation spectrum.

In the spirit of helping you better understand what these consumers of goods and services are purchasing, I have listed below some of the leading trend indicators and, where applicable, I have provided some product information to support this data. In addition, I have noted questions that you should ponder regarding how this might help you be more of a forward-thinking service provider to your customers.

Traditional outdoor manufacturers are seeing their biggest increases in technical and leisure apparel inspired by gym activities such as yoga, Pilates, and walking/jogging. This includes exercise mats, activity-specific footwear, multi-use gym bags/packs, videos and CDs.

Relaxation and meditation is becoming more popular. Vendors new to the outdoor industry are creating multi media formats for consumers to meditate, sleep better and even become more focused on sporting tasks.

There is a large emphasis on traditional vendors producing clothing that can be worn and/or layered to accommodate both indoor and outdoor activities. Of the more than 40 clothing vendors I observed, 90 percent of them had introduced fitness-related pieces to their product lines.

Wrist-top computers are increasingly geared toward providing not only the basic gym metrics, e.g. heart rate, calories expended, etc., but also include outdoor measures including elevation, temperature and even real-time Internet weather reports.

Some of the products above should be considered when you expand the products you sell in your pro shops and use incentives to reward current members or to capture possible customers. Many of these products can be used in conjunction with the increasing number of class and clinic offerings that support your members' goals of exercising to perform better in recreational activities *outside* of the gym environment.

Here are some questions to ponder as you attempt to capture and service your members both inside and outside your club with outdoor technology: Are you choosing new equipment purchases based on conversations with a broad range of your club members? Do these products support activities that they participate in outdoors? Have you recognized the trend toward portable stability, core training, multi-use clothing and other products that address your members' lifestyles? Do you address, in some fashion, products that members are purchasing elsewhere to use while exercising? Have you considered activities your members are engaged in *outside* of your club, and how you might capitalize on those *inside* of your club?

Thought-leading and successful clubs from large players to specialty niche operators are creating formats and selling products that support the outdoor industry trend. Consider that it might be time for you to get on the playing field and do the same

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