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# Fitness

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AWARDS




**The Sustainability Issue**  
FITNESS GOES GREEN

## Exercises in Sustainability:

# FITNESS

BY SHIRLEY ARCHER-EICHENBERGER, JD, MA



**T**rends suggest that today's consumer, impacted by pandemic events, thinks more about fitness within the realm of self-care and total wellness. This broader wellness perspective includes interest in the environment and their communities—and in businesses that care about these things. In fact, consumers and employees alike are often highly motivated to support companies that take this extra step. (See "Doing Well by Doing Good," page 36.)

Now, as the fitness industry continues to recover after months of COVID-19 restrictions, fitness professionals can redefine "business as usual" to integrate an emphasis on "green fitness."

This article provides an overview of sustainability issues that challenge the fitness industry, the steps that some market leaders are taking to forge change, some ways to improve sustainability practices and the potential benefits to your business.

### What Is Sustainability?

**Sustainability** is defined as "taking action to protect our shared environment—air, water, land and ecosystems—in ways that are economically viable, beneficial to human health and well-being, and socially just in the long term," according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA 2021). A **green** product or approach is one that poses less harm to human or planet health (EPA 2022a). The key for business owners is finding the balance in addressing business needs while, at the same time, serving environmental urgencies and protecting human well-being. >>



# US



# GREEN

**Promoting a healthier planet while inspiring health in our clients is not only admirable: It's an increasingly vital part of ensuring a business is sustainable economically. What does that mean for our industry—and how can fit pros “green” their approach?**

"A lot of green initiatives are simply about not wasting stuff and getting the maximum out of what you use. I come from a family where we didn't waste energy. Integrating [that approach] into the business is natural," says Ken Endelman, founder and CEO of Balanced Body\*, in Sacramento, California. Balanced Body, a manufacturer of Pilates and other training equipment and an educational provider, is a leader in sustainability practices in the fitness industry. Currently, Balanced Body's manufacturing facility is equipped with solar panels, among numerous other green initiatives, and is a **net-zero energy producer**, or one that consumes only as much energy as it produces (EPA 2022b).

Transitioning to a sustainable operating model requires both a long-term commitment and a mindset change, adds Adam Boesel, founder of The Green Microgym in Portland, Oregon.

## Doing Well by Doing Good

IT'S A WIN-WIN



Many experts agree that emphasizing sustainability goals is good business—a

perfect example of "doing well by doing good."

### ATTRACTING AND RETAINING MEMBERS

Millennials and Generation Z, in particular, care about the environment—and about spending money with companies that align with their values. Millennials and Gen Z also represent 80% of club members, according to 2019 research conducted by Les Mills (2022).

Nearly two-thirds of consumers globally (63%) prefer to buy goods and services from companies that stand for a shared purpose—one that reflects their personal values and beliefs, according

to Accenture (Barton 2018).

A 2020 IBM survey reported that nearly 60% of consumers surveyed are willing to change shopping habits to reduce environmental impact. Nearly 80% indicated sustainability is important for them. For those who say it is "very/extremely important," over 70% would pay a premium of 35% for brands that are sustainable and environmentally responsible (Haller, Lee & Cheung 2020).

"To attract prospective members and retain existing members, it's critical to spread the [sustainability message]," says Ruben Mejia, executive vice president for SportsArt Americas, in Seattle. "Let people know that socially responsible, sustainable solutions have been integrated into the [fitness] experience [at your club], showing that core values are more than just a



list on the wall, but are being lived every day."

This, of course, requires us to use our marketing and communication skills to get the word out about what we're doing. We can also enlist the ideas and help of our clients to grow a greener and healthier business.

### ATTRACTING AND RETAINING EMPLOYEES

Workers are also more values-driven in today's marketplace: 2021 has been dubbed the year of the Great Resignation or Great Attrition, with workers fleeing unsatisfying jobs in search of greener pastures.

According to research from the management con-

sulting firm McKinsey and Company, the top three reasons employees cited for quitting is that they didn't feel valued by their organizations (54%), didn't feel valued by their managers (52%), or didn't feel a sense of belonging (51%) at work (De Smet et al. 2021).

Some experts suggest that engaging employees in a shared sense of purpose by participating in a values-driven organization can boost retention and add employee satisfaction.

Read "Case Study: Balanced Body's Sustainability Story" on [ideafit.com](https://www.ideafit.com) for a real-world example of how sustainable practices are building employee-company loyalty and pride.



**Gold's Gym in Berlin features a carbon-neutral design with sustainable construction materials.**

campaign on the climate change threat and the importance of sustainability practices (Marcellin 2022a; 2022b).

### FACILITIES AND EQUIPMENT

In Germany, a fitness facility model of sustainability practices opened in July 2021. At its launch, the facility—a flagship Gold's Gym® club in Berlin—was marketed as the “gym of the future.” The facility features a carbon-neutral design with sustainable construction materials, live indoor plants and trees, and a “Green Power” area station with energy-generating indoor cycling bikes. The facility is the world's first commercial gym with a LEED Platinum certification (EPA 2022c). (LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design.) This initiative is part of a rebrand of Gold's Gym, which declared bankruptcy during the pandemic and was purchased by RSG Group. The new owner decided to redefine the brand consistent with its legacy of fitness industry leadership, according

to Gold's Gym CEO Sebastian Schoepe (Walker 2021).

### POLICIES AND TECHNOLOGIES

The International Olympic Committee adopted a sustainability policy with three major spheres of responsibility for sustainability principles and practices: 1) in its day-to-day operations as an organization, 2) in the planning and staging of the Olympic Games and 3) in assisting all stakeholders of the Olympic Movement to integrate sustainability

within their organizations and operations (IOC 2017). The Australian Olympic Committee president, Andrew Liveris, said in April 2022 that the 2032 Brisbane Olympic Games will “go down to the ground level of sustainability.” Liveris told *The Sydney Morning Herald*, “[We] have to globally co-ordinate a response to this challenge and we have the Olympics to showcase [sustainable] technologies” (Robinson 2022).

The momentum is here. Sustainability initiatives are being integrated into fitness and sports worldwide. At the head of the pack, fitness industry leaders are using multiple strategies to address the three broad categories of sustainability challenges: energy consumption, waste reduction and pollution prevention. >>

He notes that just as people who want to get in shape must change their mindset, fitness pros need to change their mindset to consciously integrate sustainable industry practices. Fortunately, the international fitness community is already supportive of and making strides in precipitating such a shift at global, local and individual levels.

## Global Fitness Industry and Sports Initiatives

Around the world, fitness and sports business leaders are seeking a variety of sustainability solutions.

### AWARENESS AND EDUCATION

Industry group leaders in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland launched an alliance in March 2022—the Sport Environment and Climate Coalition (SECC). The Coalition's purpose is to support businesses in the physical activity sector to achieve a net-zero carbon footprint. The group's first effort is to assess the industry's current level of awareness, understanding and action on climate change and environmental sustainability. The alliance is also planning an awareness

**If you own a building and are considering a remodel, conduct an energy audit.**

## Fit Pros' Top Three Sustainability Challenges

Sustainability challenges for the fitness industry, like other business sectors, fall into three broad categories: reducing energy use, reducing waste (particularly from plastics) and reducing pollution.

### 1. Reducing Energy Use

The primary challenge for fitness businesses is how to reduce energy consumption or one's carbon footprint. A **carbon footprint** is the "total amount of greenhouse gas emissions that come from the production, use and end-of-life of a product or service. It includes carbon dioxide—the gas most

## Generating Interest in Energy-Generating Equipment

A POWERFUL CHANGE

SportsArt has created a suite of cardio machines—ECO-POWER™—that is just like regular cardio equip-

ment, except it turns human exertion into electricity. "The great thing about ECO-POWER is its simplicity. Just plug it into a traditional outlet, and electricity is returned to the grid with every workout," says Ruben Mejia, executive vice president for SportsArt Americas, in Seattle.

Mejia notes that more people are becoming familiar with this technology. "In the last several years, we've seen increased interest from local and regional facilities reaching out because of internal sustainability initiatives, government green mandates or pressure from socially conscious members.

Along with regional chains, colleges and universities have become customers of SportsArt due to student groups searching to bring sustainable solutions to campus fitness centers. Hospitality and multifamily housing is also a growing opportunity. Accor Group hotels, one of the largest chains in the world, is one of our newest partners. Socially responsible fitness solutions have a positive impact not only on our [business], but also on the success of our partners."

Lawrence Biscontini, MA, a mindful movement specialist and spa retreat consultant based in Mykonos, Greece, shares an example of a self-powered smoothie juice bar called the Green Ride Monster. "Guests pick their green-based locally grown plants, fill a smoothie container and then blend ingredients by riding a sta-

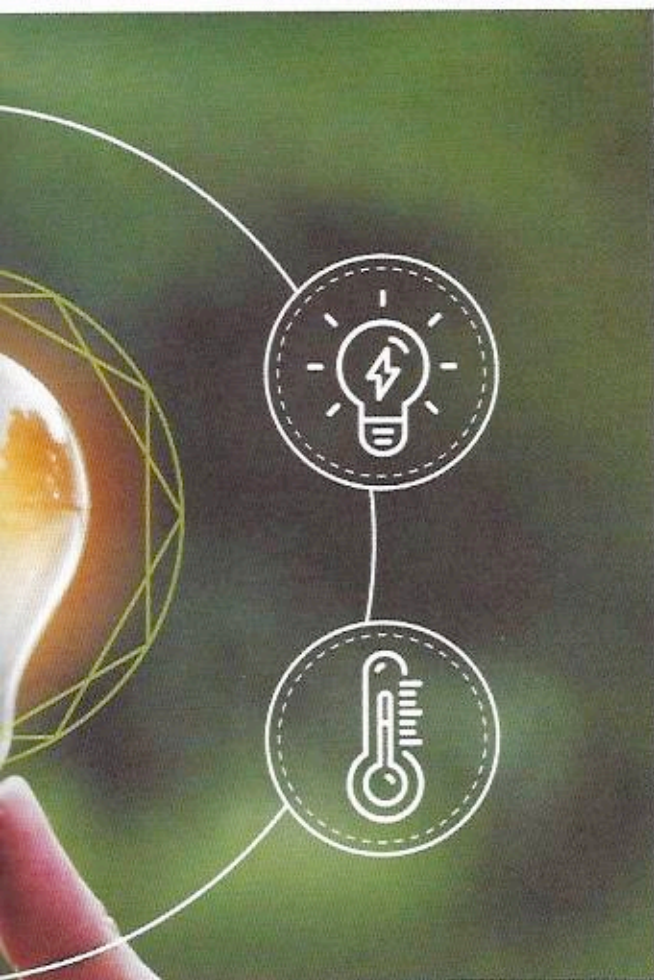


tionary cycle connected to the blender, powering the motors [using] their legs: The faster they pedal, the quicker they get their blended smoothie. No electricity is used for this juice bar." Motivate cardio enthusiasts by sharing social media posts of members contributing to the power source of the gym during workouts. This may even inspire new gym goers, and it establishes the facility as an industry leader doing sustainable good.

Adam Boesel, founder of The Green Microgym in Portland, Oregon, and a green fitness pioneer, invented an energy-generating spin bike 15 years ago. Today, he offers The

Green Read and Ride Bike for schools and is a rep for SportsArt. Boesel notes that sales of energy-generating equipment have grown in the last few years as a result of sustainability education and increasing awareness of energy-generating products, but he thinks the industry can do better.

"If decision-makers at the highest levels of the industry continue to either not care or to drag their feet on becoming educated on how electricity-generating equipment can contribute to transforming gyms from very-high-energy-using facilities to something much more sustainable, it will be a huge opportunity missed and a lot of money wasted."



**Primary areas for energy consumption reduction include facility design and construction, materials, insulation, lighting, air conditioning, appliances, and equipment usage.**

Primary areas for energy consumption reduction include facility design and construction, materials, insulation, lighting, air conditioning, appliances, and equipment usage. The good news is that, while making changes requires vision, commitment and planning, sustainability efforts pay for themselves over the long term—both in dollars and in goodwill with customers and employees. “You have to initially take a hit with cash, but it’s the right thing to do,” says Endelman. “Over time, it pays for itself.”

Michele Wong, MS, chief operations officer at Active\*, a wellness company in San Francisco, agrees. “When [facilities we advise] have undertaken initiatives to conserve energy, we have seen overall costs decrease by at least 10% per year. Cost savings have been realized quickly in the form of cost stabilization. Very quickly after we started implementing energy-saving measures, we [saw] utility costs level off in markets where energy costs are rising.”

**Making a carbon-reduction commitment requires planning and specific science-based interim targets to be meaningful.**

#### **FACILITY DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION**

It may be easiest to implement green initiatives at a facility if you’re building it from the ground up, but even a redesign or remodel is a good time to make these changes. “The design phase is key to implementing most sustainability practices,” says Justin Honas, director of procurement and design at Active in Chandler, Arizona. “The earlier you can get [sustainable]

items into the design, the easier it will be to accomplish.”

**Ask about incentives.** “The first place to go is to your local utility company,” says Endelman. “Many municipalities have green initiatives, and companies may offer tax rebates or credits for installation of different products.” Learn what’s available in your community.

**Build a green team.** Endelman suggests working with contractors who are LEED certified or trained, and tell them you want a “green” building. Established in the 1990s by a coalition of organizations, including the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), LEED-certified buildings comply with various criteria such as eco-friendly site selection, use of recycled building materials and energy

commonly emitted by humans—and others, including methane, nitrous oxide, and fluorinated gases, which trap heat in the atmosphere, causing global warming. Usually, the bulk of an individual’s carbon footprint will come from transportation, housing and food,” according to the *The New York Times* (Albeck-Ripka n.d.).

#### **MAKE A PLEDGE AND A PLAN**

Making a carbon reduction commitment requires planning and specific science-based interim targets to be meaningful. This type of commitment is one of the 11 strategic steps in “Business Playbook” from *Outside Business Journal* on working toward net-zero emissions. A meaningful pledge includes three parts:

**Interim goals:** a clear plan to cut emissions each year by a specific amount, such as to reach 50% reduction by 2030 and achieving net-zero emissions by 2050. (Endelman notes, however, that it need not take that long, as Balanced Body has reached net-zero emissions in 2022.)

**Concrete plans:** actions the business will take to reduce energy use.

**Transparency:** public progress reports that share steps made toward goal achievement (Kwak-Hefferan & Palmer 2022).

efficiency. LEED Platinum certification, like the one achieved by Gold's Gym in Berlin, is the USGBC's highest specification, and it addresses sustainability issues like reducing embodied carbon through recycled and locally sourced materials, controlling indoor pollutants, reducing energy and water consumption, and promoting the use of bicycles and fuel-efficient vehicles.

**Add insulation.** Better insulation can significantly impact energy use. Endelman says upgrading insulation at the Balanced Body facility not only improved energy efficiency but also provided a well-insulated, stable temperature year-round, with better acoustics and a more comfortable working environment.

**Update your windows.** Honas notes that windows provide numerous options for improving energy efficiency, including additional glass panes for insulation, films to reduce glare and

## Additional Resources

To learn more, check out the following resources:

### BUSINESS SERVICES

**This organization supports LEED certification and green buildings worldwide:**

U.S. Green Building Council ([usgbc.org](http://usgbc.org)).

**This service provider offers consultations on business operations:**

Active Wellness: The Healthy Life Company ([activewellness.com](http://activewellness.com)).

**This organization supports businesses to achieve net-zero emissions and offers climate-neutral business certification:**

Climate Neutral ([climateneutral.org](http://climateneutral.org)).

**This organization calculates a business's carbon footprint and provides solutions to neutralize carbon emissions:**

Cooler ([cooler.dev](http://cooler.dev)).

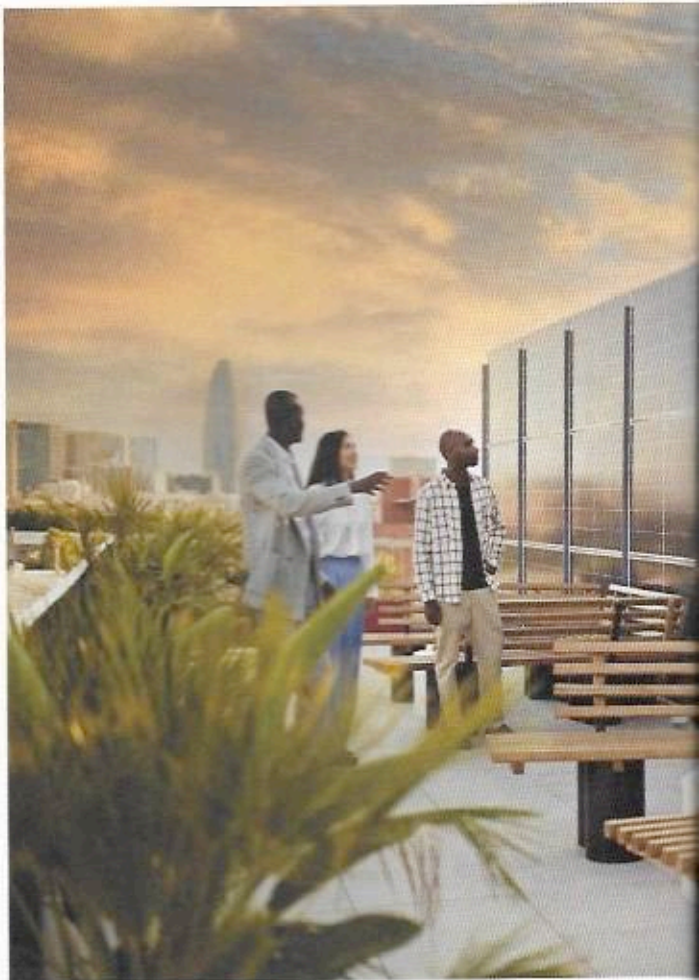
### EQUIPMENT OPTIONS

**These equipment providers offer energy-generating cardio equipment:**

SportsArt ([gosportsart.com](http://gosportsart.com)) and The Green Microgym ([thegreenmicrogym.com](http://thegreenmicrogym.com)).

### SUSTAINABILITY PLANNING

**This article outlines 11 steps toward creating a business with carbon-neutral operations:** "Business playbook: How to work toward net-zero carbon emissions" by Elisabeth Kwak-Hefferan and Lisa Palmer for *Outside Business Journal* ([outsidebusinessjournal.com/issues/business-playbook-how-to-work-toward-net-zero-carbon-emissions](http://outsidebusinessjournal.com/issues/business-playbook-how-to-work-toward-net-zero-carbon-emissions)).



block ultraviolet rays, mirrored glass to reflect sunlight, and blinds to prevent direct sunlight from warming places. At Balanced Body, adding skylights in the warehouse brought in more natural light and reduced artificial lighting costs.

**Consider an energy audit.** If you own a building and are considering a remodel, conduct an energy audit. Organizations like the Climate Neutral Group ([climateneutralgroup.com](http://climateneutralgroup.com)) or Cooler ([Cooler.dev](http://Cooler.dev)) can measure a business's carbon footprint. Alternatively, contact your local utility for energy measurement resources. Install an energy monitoring system, and evaluate progress as changes are integrated.

**Become a green tenant.** If you are renting your facility, approach your landlord to learn about existing sustainability features and what changes are possible. Tenants can speak to landlords about replacing fluorescent lights with LED lights and installing dimmers, for example. And if you are looking to move to a different rental property, don't commit to a lease until you've found one that meets your energy utilization and sustainability criteria.

### SOLAR PANELS AND INDOOR LIGHTING

**Renewable energy, or clean energy,** comes from natural sources that are constantly replenished, such as solar, wind, hydropower and geothermal energy. Investigate regional possibilities.





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Solar panel installation was a game changer for Balanced Body. More than 1,000 solar panels have been installed in its more than 100,000-square-foot Sacramento-based facility (which includes office, manufacturing and shipping/distribution space), with an additional 1,118 to be installed by fall 2022, which will transform the facility from a net energy user to a net energy producer.

When evaluating facility space, talk with your realtor, contractor, designer or other relevant professional to determine if solar power is a local option and whether the building's roof shape will support solar panel installation.

Indoor and outdoor lighting technology also impacts energy efficiency. Experts agree that LED lights should be used throughout. Install motion sensors to enable lights to automatically shut off when rooms are not in use. Endelman notes that transforming Balanced Body's lighting paid for itself within 3.5 years.

#### **AIR AND WATER TEMPERATURE**

Evaluate systems for both energy efficiency and wellness. Many fitness facilities upgraded air conditioning systems during the pandemic due to health concerns. Manage energy

use with programmable temperature zones. Energy Star-certified appliances and HVAC systems, which meet specific energy efficiency standards, are more expensive initially; over time, costs are recaptured through reduced energy use. Also consider climate-controlled fans to even out temperatures, improve circulation and maintain optimal humidity levels for improved health and lower energy costs.

When it comes to heating water, notes Honas, "Tankless water heaters can be a great solution. They do not have to keep unused hot water up to temperature. They simply heat water as it's being used, preventing energy waste. These are especially useful in areas where hot water is not in constant use." He notes that installation is dependent on building design and other factors, but he emphasizes that the effort is worthwhile. Some municipalities offer rebates on certain water heater models. Check with your utility provider.

**Waste reduction is significant for sustainability practice. It involves applying the familiar principles of reduce, reuse and recycle.**

#### **FITNESS AND OTHER EQUIPMENT**

"Powering down equipment and shutting off lights in unused facility areas during non-peak hours saves energy," says Honas. Choose equipment with automatic shutdown features. Set up televisions to be on only when viewed. Before purchasing new equipment, evaluate energy consumption, among other key factors. For example, infrared saunas consume much less energy than other sauna types. In addition to con-

serving energy, install energy-generating equipment when possible. (See "Generating Interest in Energy-Generating Equipment," page 38.)

## **2. Reducing Waste**

Waste reduction is the next significant category for sustainability practice. It involves applying the familiar principles of reduce, reuse and recycle. The following are major areas for change.

#### **PLUMBING AND WATER USE**

Updated bathroom fixtures can make a big difference. Consider low-flow showers and toilets. Waterless urinals can eliminate men's room flushes. Equip faucets with sensors for automatic

on/off control. Experts recommend testing low-flow products thoroughly before installation to make sure that they meet expectations, as quality can vary widely among manufacturers. For example, when speaking with product vendors, ask to visit sites that have installed a particular product so you can experience using it, or request client testimonials from those who have installed the system. If possible in your region, consider rainwater collection to offset consumption.

#### PAPER PRODUCTS

Limit paper use facility-wide. Here are a few ideas and tips:

**Shift to digital.** Honas says, "We love using digital signage throughout the club versus using posters and flyers. Direct people to websites, apps and social media accounts for more information to limit paper." Also consider digital schedules and scheduling, billing and even contract signing.

**Add hand dryers.** While hot-air hand dryers may seem like a simple fix, they've received mixed reviews. Endelman says that if too many people take bio-breaks at the same time, dryers can be too time consuming to be workable. Honas suggests that a best practice is to have dryers but offer paper towels as a second option, positioned farther away from the sinks. "This seems to reduce waste, keep facilities clean and keep members happy," he says.

#### PRODUCT PACKAGING

Many facilities already use refillable pump dispensers for soap and shampoo. Honas notes this is also a branding opportunity. Facilities can further reduce environmental toxins and "carbon costs" of shipping with these tips.

**Buy green—and local.** Replace shipped orders of personal care products with ones that are nontoxic, organic and locally produced. Local vendor relationships also improve community goodwill and add marketing opportunities.

**Install water bottle filling stations.** Encourage less use of single-use plastic water bottles (paper cups, too) by installing water dispensers. Remind clients to bring water bottles to classes or sessions. Offer stainless steel water bottles for sale (printed with your logo).

**Cut back on plastic wrap.** Reduce or eliminate use of plastic wrap or bags from goods used, produced or sold. When packaging is necessary, sell products packaged in paper, glass or aluminum. Lawrence Biscontini, MA, a mindful movement specialist and spa retreat consultant based in Mykonos, Greece, shares that in one Mykonos facility, plastics have been removed from all fitness areas including individual wrappings for COVID-19-sensitive items like individual drinking vessels and disposable eco-masks.

**Talk to vendors and suppliers.** Endelman notes that suppliers typically want to satisfy customers, but it's up to customers



**Sustainability practices are inextricably linked with human health and well-being.**

to tell them to be green in their practices. Biscontini suggests using social media to support "greener" brands. "[Photograph and post] packages from companies to show how they choose to wrap, pack and ship. Tag companies. Say how much you love the products while imploring [the companies] to be more sustainable on 'pack-and-ship' practices. Be visual!"

This goes for companies that package your products for sale, as well. "We work with our packaging company and tell them what we want. It's an iterative process. It's trial and error to protect our products from being damaged. Customers are very happy that we've moved to recyclable packaging products. In the EU, our distributors love it, as environmental restrictions are more severe than in the U.S.," says Endelman.

#### RECYCLED AND REFURBISHED PRODUCTS

Implement a visible recycling program with accessible recycling containers. Install sustainable and recycled building materials when possible. Honas notes several renewable flooring options exist, but care is required in fitness spaces. "We have not had great success with their durability. They can, however, be used in areas that do not have fitness



**To reduce chemical use, Longfellow Health Clubs in Wayland and Natick, Massachusetts, installed a state-of-the-art saltwater purification system in the swimming pool.**

products can be organically grown and locally sourced. All of this reduces chemicals throughout the life cycle of the product.

#### CLEANING PRODUCTS

Choose environmentally friendly cleaning products, and purchase locally as much as possible. Promote this policy among clients. Those with allergies may be particularly appreciative.

#### TRANSPORTATION

Facilities can engage clients in supporting sustainability practices by providing incentives for active travel or car-pooling. Honas suggests creating a rewards program that offers points for walking, running or biking to the club. Allow members to redeem points for branded swag, discounts, guest passes and more.

### Inspiring the World to Sustainability

Sustainability practices are inextricably linked with human health and well-being. While it can be overwhelming and cost-prohibitive to consider radical change, it's doable for anyone to use the suggestions here to integrate sustainability initiatives into their business—one step, one day at a time.

Fitness professionals are in the business of transformation, motivation, education and inspiration. We improve people's lives with positive energy every day. Imagine the possibilities if we channel that energy to also improve the world that we all inhabit.

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**Editor's note:** For a list of references and a case study on how one wellness company approached and implemented sustainability initiatives, please access this article on [ideafit.com](http://ideafit.com).

equipment." Fitness equipment can also be repaired and refurbished, rather than replaced. Alternatively, consider replacing old equipment with energy-generating machines.

### 3. Reducing Pollution

Fitness professionals and facility owners and managers can make a commitment to reducing toxins and using environmentally friendly products and sustainably sourced materials whenever possible.

#### SALTWATER POOLS

To reduce chemical use, Longfellow Health Clubs in Wayland and Natick, Massachusetts, installed a state-of-the-art saltwater purification system in the swimming pool. Under the leadership of club founder Laury Hammel, who also founded the Sustainable Business Network of Massachusetts in 1988 (SBNMass.org), the clubs also installed a cogeneration unit that heats the swimming pool and showers with heat generated from natural gas that also creates additional electricity.

#### SUSTAINABLE FIBERS AND FOODS

Sell products that are sustainably produced and/or sourced whenever possible. This includes clothing and food products. (Polyester is made from plastic.) Many athletic apparel providers now offer environmentally conscious activewear. Food