

Creative Programming for Challenging Times

By Lawrence Biscontini, MA

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Don't let a slashed budget keep you down.



Members love group fitness programming, and it is truly the heart of the facility. The current financial situation, however, has affected most group fitness budgets. If this is the case for you, purchasing costly new equipment and training may not figure into your business plan this year. However, you can still offer creative and press-generating classes. The following ideas provide helpful insight into how to keep your program fresh without purchasing anything new. When replacing or redesigning a class, always choose one that pulls low or average numbers first. Changing a popular choice may outrage some guests. There is no need to change anything that already works perfectly.

Work Backward

The first suggestion for creating a new program involves the technique of “working backward.” Begin with what the goal of a class is and work in reverse. Your goal might be to improve strength, cardiovascular capacity, flexibility, balance or any combination of these. Evaluate the techniques you currently use to reach those goals, and make a creative list of other ways to achieve the same outcome. Consider how to do this with no equipment, and with equipment you already have.

For example, imagine that you offer “Cardio Sculpt” with the purpose of achieving resistance/strength training and cardiovascular gains. Currently, this class uses step training and hand weights. Without equipment, you could meet this goal by alternating boot-camp, body-weight-style calisthenics with low-impact cardiovascular choreography. Using existing equipment, you could alternate stability ball resistance/strength training with Gliding™ disks. In both cases, the muscles worked and calories burned would be similar to those achieved in the existing “Cardio Sculpt” class, but the approach would offer a completely new experience for students. In addition, they would be cross-training their muscles differently.

Provide a Face L.I.F.T

“L” Stands for “Label.” Give people new classes by giving classes new names. Golden Door Spas, where I created signature movement programming for years, chose creative names to attract spa guests. Names like “Animal Kingdom” for yoga, “Hard Core, Peace Core” for core training and “Taming

the Monkeys” for meditation proved popular in a market where people expected new things. Sometimes a great name change alone can generate press.

Conversely, Jessica Davis, group fitness manager for several New York City clubs, prefers simpler names to make classes easily identifiable. “If the class name reflects the content accurately,” says Davis, “I see no reason to have 10 different names for body conditioning, unless the class is indeed truly unique. Cute names might momentarily pique the interest of some, but only a really good instructor packs them in.”

“I” Stands for “Intensity.” When making a new class, think about changing the intensity. If you advertise that a class is appropriate for those who wish to work at a lower intensity, you may attract newcomers who are intimidated by a higher-intensity program. But when the instructor feels that the majority of students have progressed to a more difficult intensity level, it may be time to rename the class using words like *power*, *level 3* or *boot camp*.

“F” Stands for “Feeling.” There are three cost-efficient ways to alter the overall feel of a class and make it new: change the clothes, the music or the lighting. Changing your attire for a particular class can make the experience seem more athletic, more dance-based, funkier or even more energized. Think about your clothes metaphorically, and try to match what you wear with the overall feeling you want to create in the class. Irene Almario from Gold’s Gym in Manila, the Philippines, alternates between funky street clothes and Spanish-style flamenco dresses when she teaches Latin dance. “They always look forward to a change, and they know what we will be emphasizing based on how I come dressed to class.”

Similarly, changing the music can change the focus. You can manipulate words, tempo, genre and even volume. Start with a completely new playlist. Doreen Rakowski, winner of the 2006 IDEA Biscontini Scholarship, always prepares a varied playlist for her classes in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. “I teach to special populations, and they sometimes complain, so I make them a deal: they pick the music *they* want, and, if I have it, they have to do the exercises *I* want. It’s funny when youngsters ask for a certain band, thinking that I won’t have it, but I usually do. Recently, I’ve done yoga and tai chi to AC/DC and Nickelback!”

Finally, changing the lighting dramatically changes the mood of the room and, sometimes, of the participants. Steve Feinberg of Equinox Fitness Clubs in New York City raises and lowers the mood lighting of his “Speedball” interval class approximately every 7 minutes so that exercisers feel different during work bouts than they do during recovery. The effect is not unlike that of being in a Broadway musical, with its lighting changes for various scenes. If your studio has specialized lighting options, experiment to create different moods.

“T” Stands for “Time.” Choosing a different timeframe for a new class is also a cost-effective way to introduce something fresh to the schedule. If most classes are 45 or 50 minutes long, a new class could be a shorter, express-style class lasting 20–30 minutes. Alternatively, you could link a short

abdominals session with another shorter session, creating a new 45- or 50-minute experience. Scotty Esquibel, group exercise director at the Dr. Kenneth Cooper Aerobics Center in Dallas, Texas, schedules shorter classes back-to-back so that the cool-down of one class serves as the warm-up for the next, providing seamless service and fluid movement.

Focus on Men

Another way to create a new class experience without spending a lot is to focus on the often untapped male population. Rewrite any current strength, balance and flexibility class descriptions that might appeal to men. Focus on outcomes like “stronger core,” “improved golf and tennis game” and “decreased reaction time for sports,” for example. Consider inviting a popular male and female personal trainer to guest-teach this new class, even if only at the start. Dimitris Kandris, a group and personal trainer based in Athens, Greece, volunteers to teach “Fusion Friday,” a class for men and women on the last Friday of every month. “Class is packed, with sign-ups starting a week in advance,” Kandris says. “I even get requests to train with me on a regular basis, so not only do we have a special class on the schedule, but we ultimately generate more revenue in the process. Men come because they aren’t threatened, since they already have seen me on the gym floor.”

Utilize Existing Resources

Fusion programming offers another way to find wealth in a program limited by budget constraints. Consider all available resources, and chart the talent you have in-house, even if it is currently not being utilized. Survey your instructors so you can fill out an accurate, up-to-date chart. Ask staff about their hobbies and interests, the classes they currently teach, certifications, volunteer activities, equipment qualifications, continuing education programs and ideas they have for new classes. After the survey, you may find ideas jumping at you as you become aware of instructors’ hobbies. Patricia Sawchuk Olivieri, fitness consultant for clubs in northern Italy, surveys her staff twice yearly. A recent survey revealed that one of her instructors volunteers at her local church teaching gentle, seated stretching. After careful planning, the facility added non-yoga-inspired stretching to the club schedule and called it “Seated Stretching.” It drew large numbers of older adults who were intimidated by traditional yoga.

Pay Attention to the Schedule

The way you print your schedule says a lot about your program. Your facility may offer amazing towels, award-winning meals, the newest equipment and the best music, but at the end of the day, for over half your members, what represents your facility in the home (usually stuck to the refrigerator) is the printed schedule of classes. Giving your schedule a facelift does not have to cost much more than time. Since you already have a budget for printing, consider reformatting the title, font, layout and class descriptions for the next printing. At the very least, update the title from the old “Aerobics Class Schedule” to something more exciting like “Group Wellness Menu,” “Choices for a New Body” or “How to Become a Champion of Living.” This can work wonders to gain attention for your new look.

Perhaps you could also add color and symbol coding to your schedule to identify special types of classes. For example, classes appropriate for first-timers could be underlined. Classes emphasizing cardiovascular work could appear in red, and those incorporating a strong element of balance could appear in boxes. Ultimately, the overall appearance of your menu says a great deal about the value your club places on its schedule.

Help Others

Tie a class to charity, both to help the world and to generate press. Maureen Hagan, 2006 IDEA Instructor of the Year award winner, held events in Canada called "We Kick Off Our Shoes to Yoga," in which participants placed their shoes in baskets upon entering the room. Those shoes were donated to charity. You could hold similar "From the Classes to the Masses" events for different disciplines, using winter coats, canned goods and even baby items. Notify local radio stations and newspapers about these events. This will help spread the word about the goodwill the facility generates from community-minded classes.

Survey Members

Always consider surveying your members before making extensive changes to a winning program. Internet survey sites like surveymonkey.com offer inexpensive ways to survey members by e-mail and find out exactly what works and what does not. Members are usually not shy about making their preferences known.

Making changes to an existing movement program doesn't have to be costly. Incorporate some of these inexpensive ideas to refresh your program, to attract new guests and to keep your budget intact.

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