

Every now and then I get a strong premonition about our industry. Most of the time I don't do or say anything about them too publicly, for fear of chastisement or undue criticism. Like most people, I like to be liked as well as respected. But sometimes, the hunch is so strong that I decide to step out despite what may happen or what people may say to or about me. Such is the case this time.

One of the things I've attempted to do in my three-plus decades in this business is to be looking at the business as well as be in it. It helps to develop perspective...at least for me.

Year after year, as I witness fitness facilities sell more and more memberships to cover the back door of attrition, I realize that something is innately wrong with the model. I mean, an industry which has sold some 150 million memberships in the past two decades, yet has only slightly north of 40 million present members, is an industry with a serious hitch in its gitalong, wouldn't you say?

"wellness." What will likely come about within the next few years (I hesitate to say it, but perhaps within the next few months), is a divide in the national marketplace.

One road will be traditional fitness, no doubt governed in majority by a very few well-heeled players who know how to do it...how to appeal to the already-interested and the relatively-easily satisfied consumers. I believe that particular entity will probably level out at 30 to 35 million consumers - "members."

The other road, likely more appealing to a continent that is rapidly aging, will be the new wellness industry. Certain players like well-organized hospital-based or medically-oriented facilities are already making inroads in that direction. Not-for-profits, which have pretty much been following the traditional fitness model, will have to make a choice. Do they embrace wellness and the up-skilling it requires, or will they try to maintain a niche in fitness against ever-increasing, stronger competition? I believe that those who take a risk and move

"A FORK IN THE ROAD"

By Michael Scott Scudder

The early-on mission of the "fitness" industry - getting people to exercise - was replaced over 15 years ago by the model of "sell memberships," nothing more, nothing less. The problem is that the model hasn't made a heckuva lot of difference in the larger scope of things. If it had, we would have far greater than 15% of the population exercising in fitness facilities today.

Presently, there is an all-out move in populated, competitive marketplaces around the country. That move is towards standardized procedures, be they big-box offerings or value-priced plays. Names like 24 Hour Fitness, L A Fitness, Lifetime Fitness and Planet Fitness have become synonymous with dominance at particular price points and facility offerings. And this is likely just the beginning. We are barely part way to the Wal-Marting of fitness.

I believe the "fitness business" as we know it, is headed 80 miles an hour towards a yet unseen, but nevertheless inherent and rapidly-approaching fork in the road. That fork in the road is

towards wellness programming will benefit from a marketplace equal to or even greater than the fitness marketplace...with predictably better long-term rewards.

Robert Frost wrote: "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I, I took the one less traveled by...and that has made all the difference."

Got your GPS ready? Here comes the fork! **OSF**

Until next time...MICHAEL

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