Specialty Pilates: Turning Profits With Niche Classes

By Ken Endelman, CEO of Balanced Body, 1-800-PILATES  www.pilates.com

Specialty Pilates classes have become popular with forward-thinking health and fitness clubs who want to expand their fee-based Pilates programming. Pilates for tennis players, golfers, older adults, new mothers, and more are now appearing on club schedules throughout the country.

Standing Out From the Crowd

Glenda Smith, Group Exercise Director at Renaissance ClubSport in Walnut Creek, California, started specialty Pilates classes as a way to set her club apart from competitors. “Our club is new and upscale, and we’re in an area with a lot of competition. Our clientele pays a lot just for membership, and more for our reformer-based Pilates classes. So we are always looking for ways to differentiate ourselves and offer our members something special and unique,” says Smith.

Smith teaches an aquatic class for older adults and noticed that they particularly enjoyed the Pilates-inspired exercises she was teaching. Seeing an opportunity to move the group into a fee-based Pilates class, she got the ball rolling by offering them free introductory mat and reformer sessions. Once she piqued their interest, she started the fee-based classes. The classes are full and Smith is now developing a Pilates class for the golfers in her club.

Elizabeth Larkam, Director of Pilates & Beyond for Western Athletic Clubs, has run a successful Pilates program for five years. An innovator in the Pilates business, Larkam is always on the lookout for creative ways to keep her program fresh. In January 2005, she asked her San Francisco Bay Area instructors to develop workshops geared to their own interests and those of the members they teach. As a result, these five clubs will feature Reformer workshops for sailors, squash players, skiers, golfers, cyclists, and a mat-based “Partner Pilates” class in which couples can do Pilates together.

Knowing Your Niche

Because Pilates develops core strength, flexibility and agility, it can benefit any segment of your membership. The key is knowing where to place the focus for each segment. For older adults, you’ll want your program to concentrate on flexibility, balance and strength. For golfers, you would focus on core strength, back strength, and flexibility. And so on, for each group you’d like to teach. In addition, an instructor should be fluent in the “lingo” of that particular niche. “This is absolutely essential,” says Shelly Power of Polestar Education, a Pilates based training and rehabilitation center in Miami, Florida. “You have to make sure an exercise is not counterproductive to what your client needs, and you have to be able to ‘talk the talk.’ If you’re teaching a class full of golfers and you aren’t using the correct terminology, they’ll shut you out in seconds.”

Promoting classes to your members is also important. Articles in your newsletter, emails to your member database, and flyers in and around the club are all good ideas. Make sure your entire staff is on board with your program. ClubSport gives its staff a daily bulletin promoting the Pilates programs available that day. At Larkam’s facility, instructors invite front desk personnel and sales staff to come see the class, knowing they are in a very influential position to promote it to members.

Turning a Profit

Because members expect to pay for Pilates equipment classes, specialty classes can be very good revenue generators. Smith runs her older adult programs as four-week sessions, charging $79 for once-a-week classes, and $145 for twice-a-week classes. As an incentive to sign up, she offers them an additional 10 percent discount.

Larkam’s specialty classes are two-hour weekend or weeknight workshops that cost $50 per member. Non-members can attend for an additional fee. When participants show substantial interest in continuing, she integrates the group into a weekly fee-based Pilates circuit class with an emphasis on that sport or interest. So far, the classes are both turning a profit and attracting new members. “Our sales force will bring a potential member in on a tour, and once they see what we are doing with...”
our Pilates program, I’ll usually get a call later on saying they want to join,” Larkam says.

If you are interested in starting a specialty class but aren’t sure where to start, ask your members. They’ll tell you exactly what their interests are, and chances are they have friends or relatives with similar interests. You’ll be surprised at how often you will hear, “My friend is a runner (…or a cyclist, or a skier…) and would absolutely love this…”

With good planning and marketing, fee-based specialty Pilates classes can be a valuable tool for your club. Not only can they keep your program fresh and interesting for current Pilates participants, they can bring new participants to your program and new members to your club. Fee-based classes add to your bottom line, building a solid profit center for your club.

Ken Endelman is the Founder and CEO of Balanced Body, Inc. He can be contacted at 800.745.2837, or visit www.pilates.com.