



# Choosing the Right Cardio Equipment for Your Health Club

marketing solution

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To choose the right cardio equipment for your club, education and due diligence are keys to make the appropriate decision based on what is best for your club vs. what is best for the sales person.

Cardiovascular training has rapidly evolved from post-heart attack therapy to a more precise field for the general exercise enthusiast. As the benefits of regular exercise become mainstream, and the necessity for individuals of all ages to exercise becomes more apparent, health clubs and wellness centers will place greater emphasis on cardiovascular training. With the heightened awareness of cardio workout benefits, the shift from weight equipment to cardio equipment is gaining momentum.

According to IHRSAs (International Health and Racquet Sports Association) 2003 Profiles of Success, the median amount spent by member clubs on new equipment was \$34, 478. If even 25 percent (\$8,619.50) of this was spent on cardio equipment the significance is obvious. According to the National Sporting Goods Association, Americans buy more than \$1.49 billion in treadmills, \$189 million in stationary bikes and \$83 million in elliptical (cross-training) machines.

Choosing the right cardio equipment for your club is imperative for ultimate success. Equipment choices can vary based on the facility users. For instance, seniors may be more comfortable on traditional cardiovascular equipment, such as stationary exercise bikes, while young adults may prefer the latest machines, such as elliptical cross-trainers. Consider the age trends in your facility when buying cardio equipment.

According to IHRSAs 2002 Trend Report, the typical health club membership is noted below:

- 12-17 = 8%
- 18-34 = 34%
- 35-54 = 37%
- 55+ = 17%

48% are male and 52% are female.

In deciding what cardio equipment to purchase it is important to consider these demographics for prudent purchase and optimal profitability. Maximizing return per member is imperative for ultimate success.

Here are some major considerations when selecting optimal cardio equipment for your facility.

### **Potential users.**

First, analyze your facility's membership and identify the potential users of cardio equipment.

- What proportion of members have low fitness levels or chronic medical conditions (club growth has seen a 226 percent increase in the senior market)?
- How many are active, regular exercisers?
- Will youth under age 16 be allowed to use the facility?

With the increased emphasis on walking, treadmills are a good choice when purchase considerations are evaluated.

When judging potential users of the facility, it is wise to consider the needs of members with disabilities. The Americans With Disabilities Act has led to recently purposed guidelines on the accessibility of health and wellness centers. These guidelines basically suggest that each one of each type of equipment be made accessible to wheelchairs by clearing floor space to make an accessible route.

### **Facility traffic.**

Another important consideration is the amount of usage your center might receive. Traffic in the center will depend on the size and demographics of the membership as well as the facility's hours of operation. A good rule of thumb is to expect that approximately 20-35 percent of the active membership will take advantage of the facility consistently. To help estimate usage, survey the members about their interest in utilizing cardio

equipment, what is their primary intended use and what features are important to them. Including the membership in the potential purchase empowers the membership and will enhance retention. Attention to member needs is always a guarantee toward longevity.

### **Facility staffing.**

Consider that less staff reduces the payroll and increases overall profits. Equipment manufacturers have recognized this fact and have capitalized on it with their advertising. Be aware of those who tell you their equipment will reduce the necessity for trained staff or overall staff requirements. The presence or absence of a staff person may also affect usage. Facilities that are staffed tend to be used more for several reasons:

1. Members perceive them as being safe.
2. Intimidation is less of a factor because someone is available to demonstrate proper use of the cardio equipment.
3. Staff presence tends to facilitate socializing.
4. Staff may be perceived as a motivating influence.

### **Cardio equipment selection.**

The major categories of cardiovascular equipment include treadmills, stationary bikes, stairclimbers and elliptical or cross-training machines. A variety of modalities of cardio equipment can be important for specific reasons.

- Different machines and modalities fit different members needs.
- Variety prevents boredom among exercisers, which in turn helps maintain usage and retention.

Treadmills are a staple in any fitness center because they simulate walking and running and have virtually no learning curve. Beginning exercisers can walk on a treadmill at a comfortable pace, and elite athletes can use this modality for speed, hill or interval training. From a caloric expenditure viewpoint, treadmills will burn the most calories per minute, per kilogram of body weight.

To identify the most appropriate treadmills the purchasing agent will want to discuss the following with the manufacturer.

- Age range of the facility and corresponding appropriateness of the specific brand.
- Condition levels the treadmill will accommodate.
- Approximate ranges of body weight (important due to the increase in overweight and obese individuals joining facilities).
- Hours of use to determine an appropriate maintenance schedule.

When the choice has been narrowed, look at the equipment specifications, such as size, weight, space needed around it, and any special electrical requirements. Typically, a dedicated line will prolong the life of the motor. Be weary if the intent is to run entertainment systems and tracking devices off the same line. The treadmill will have the greatest draw and may short the other devices and affect motor life.

Stationary bikes are also very popular. These are usually the least expensive and most space efficient. With the renewed interest in cycling, stationary bikes may be more popular than once thought. Also, many stationary bikes are self-powered, allowing flexibility in the overall floor plan.

Two types of stationary bikes are available: upright and recumbent. Upright bikes are the traditional stationary cycle; recumbent bikes allow users to sit behind the pedals on a wider seat, in a semi-reclined position with back support. Recumbents are very popular because they are comfortable; the back support they provide makes them ideal for beginning, deconditioned exercisers or those with back problems. A unique progression can be established with the cardio equipment to progress the member according to their initial condition and their desired goals.

Stairclimbers are available in two types, based on the stepping motion. Independent stairclimbers have pedals that respond specifically to the exercisers pressure. When an exerciser stands on the pedals, they both sink to the ground until the user begins climbing. With the dependent stairclimbers, the pedals are linked together; when the exerciser steps

down on one pedal, the other one goes up. Personal preferences vary; more serious exercisers may prefer the independent action that requires a bit more skill, and beginners may like the ease of use of the dependent stairclimber.

The newest category of cardio equipment is the elliptical machine or cross-trainer. Seen as a combination of a stairclimber and a cross-country ski machine, this type of equipment features pedals that follow an elliptical pattern and can go forward or in reverse. Some models also have an optional incline for the pedals. Others feature upper-body exercise as well by including the arms that move in synchronization with the foot pedals. Special care should be devoted to biomechanical alignment of the hip and knee on these devices. Some manufacturers have not considered human factors analysis when designing and building these machines. The consequence is poor alignment resulting in injury. Not an appropriate or desired result for the club industry.

Cross-training machines have surged in popularity because they are easy to use and have minimal impact on the joints. Although exercisers may be working vigorously on a cross-trainer, they perceive less exertion than when performing a comparable exercise at the same intensity, such as running. With an upper-body option, users can perform a total-body workout that burns more calories than a lower-body-only exercise in the same amount of time because more of the body is being exercised.

Other equipment such as rowers, cross-country skiers and upper body ergometers, are options for consideration. Upper-body ergometers provide upper body rotary exercise providing cardio and strength training. Features such as bi-directional resistance and a variety of modes of exercise are important considerations when considering these machines. For a diverse membership, one of these types of equipment is recommended.

**Additional feature considerations include:**

- Ease of operation.
- A “quick start” feature for those that want to begin exercising without the “bells and whistles.”
- Continuous heart rate monitoring

(utilizing a transmitter for heart rate rather than intermittent pulse).

- Wireless heart rate control – set the target heart rate and the machine adjusts the workload to maintain constant workload independent of speed.
- Workload control – set watts, maintains constant workload independent of speed.
- Large, visually appealing, easy-to read, high-density display.
- Random profile – allowing infinite number of program profiles.
- Profile variability – pre-programmed protocols with space to program custom protocols.

Try before you buy. There are a lot of options when selecting cardio equipment for your facility. Take your time, shop around and think carefully about what meets your needs. Never buy equipment on impulse or under pressure of “specials” by the manufacturer. You should try out any equipment under consideration (in your exercise cloths) several times before you buy. Have the manufacturer leave the equipment at your facility for a 30-day trial and concede to member comments, needs and desires. You are the consummate consumer.

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