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Girls (not) aloud

Adding value has become a common concept in the health and fitness market but a misunderstanding of what value means to many of its customers is leading many fitness facilities in the wrong direction. Michael Cassop Thompson explains with the help of a free weights area and a small number of women.

In the movie *Field of Dreams*, Kevin Costner's character, Ray Kinsella, keeps hearing the ghostly voice of Shoeless Joe Jackson, who urges him to "build it [a baseball stadium] and he will come". Later in the film this phrase develops into "people will come; Ray. They will turn up at your driveway." Kinsella builds a baseball stadium on his farmland based upon nothing other than a foggy voice in his head and in the expectation that "he" and people (paying spectators) will arrive in their hoards and the field of dreams will become a reality.

The approach adopted by Kinsella could be termed a value-adding approach. Kinsella will add value to his land by building a stadium from which, if successful, revenues will flow. In leisure many organisations appear to take this approach. Unfortunately, this view of value is based upon a now outdated belief that value is something that can be added. This added value notion can be rejected. It is merely an enduring economic anachronism that uses a factory vocabulary to suggest that value can be added to physical goods and service, rather than viewing how value emerges for the customer within their lifeworlds (Gummerus, 2011; Gronroos, 2011; Kowalkowski 2011; Witell et al., 2011).

There are problems with using the added-value approach. In simple terms, you cannot add value to anything; it is the customer who creates value for themselves by utilising various resources at their disposal (Heinonen, et al., 2013). An example of this would be skateboarders who utilise the street and its furniture to create value for themselves (Borden, 2001). A new role for the organisation is to support customers in their value-seeking endeavours. Strategically, this moves the organisation from viewing itself as being responsible for creating added value to an orientation that is value-supporting and customer-centric.

'Value-added' is a term that has been used in the leisure sector for a long time. Value-adding is usually considered as adding value to goods or service during production. How many times per month do you hear the phrases "we need added value" or "how can we provide added value"? Unfortunately, in practice this approach has limited relevance and in some cases this results in a disconnect between what leisure services are providing and the actual value customers seek.

Many examples can be found of organisations that appear to have taken strategic decisions to add value to their offering. Some added-value offerings leisure organisations have developed that have failed in spectacular fashion include: skateboard parks, which did not support the value street skaters sought; various website forums, social media pages and twitter accounts; virtual aerobic classes; and a whole raft of failed ventures. Readers will be able to insert their own examples. In these examples, organisations built it and they – customers – did not come. (Clearly this is not universal but many attempts at the above fail because they do not resonate with customers' value-seeking endeavours.)

Value-added, although a term of worthy intent, should be reconsidered.
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It results in some organisations taking the wrong direction. They look inwardly to how they can add value to what they have, rather than looking outwardly to understand what value the customers seek.

By way of an example, back in the 1970s and 1980s I was, as many others will have been, witness to women's cautious attempts to enter weight training gyms. In those days few private health clubs existed, local authority provision was restricted to small uninspiring rooms and training with weights was viewed through lenses full of myth: "Weight training would make you slow"; "Muscle would turn to fat"; "Only narcissists would use weights"; and my personal favourite, "If you go to a weight training gym you will be beaten up by the people who already train there." These were places that the general populace did not frequent and in which women were very rarely seen.

Fast forward some 30-plus years and new health club gyms open on a weekly basis, the UK health and fitness industry is currently worth some currently £3.92 billion (according to The Leisure Database Company, 2013) and a significant number of the general public partake in physical exercise in health club gyms. Most would now view women as having unfettered access to contemporary health club gyms. However, closer inspection using a value-supporting mindset may change that conclusion. Ask yourself the question: how are women supported in their quest for effective exercise results? I am sure many will think that health club gym offerings provide a host of opportunities for women. Walk into a health club gym and look again. If you still don't see it, read on.

The problem lies within the detail. You will frequently find women's value-seeking not supported in a way similar way to men. Often a large area of the health club called the free weights section does not have a female in sight. Why is this? Simply put, organisations have not got close to the value women seek from a health club gym and the exercise results women desire. They just build the free weights training areas and hope women will arrive in numbers. My experience over 35 years of frequenting numerous health clubs and gyms is that free weight areas have been built and in many, many cases women have not arrived. But it gets worse: the lack of use of these areas is perhaps fostered by institutional sexism.

Women, like men, may want the exercise benefits that free weights could provide as part of an overall physical fitness programme. There does not appear to be a logical reason why they would not. Free weights – which have benefits resistance machines do not – are not the preserve of bodybuilders. In fact, change the context and women will merrily "pump iron"; for example, in a BodyPump class. Unfortunately, often the provision of free weights is merely lip service and not really on the agenda for women. I would like to provide an alternative vision of a free weights area, one where you walk into a health club gym, go to the free weights area and see it full of women of all ages using the barbells and dumb-bells as part of their overall routine to shape and tone their bodies. In addition, I would like to see the squat rack utilised by these women. In many clubs this vision does not and will not exist for some time to come. Why not? Because many clubs – de facto – do not allow it. Perhaps more charitably we can say that clubs do not support the value women seek from exercise by making free weights an integral part of their routines as they do with men. But either way women are excluded.

It could be said that free weights areas in health club gyms are designed and operated to exclude women. This starts at a very early stage whereby many health club gyms do not generally integrate free weights with general provision. Many have a designed-in "you are now entering a different area" feel and many of these areas are immediately appropriated by men. Customers – particularly women – often refer to the free weights area as "the men's bit", "the heavy weights bit" and "the

bouncers' area"; it is certainly not somewhere they would venture. On occasions, some women accompanied by personal trainers nervously enter the edges of the free weights area and carry weights out to perform their exercises around the corner and out of sight of the "men's bit".

Added to the factors above is consideration that many clubs have elite athletic imagery on the wall, a limited dumb-bell range (few lighter weights), customers sitting on equipment using phones, and a culture of excessive posing, huffing, puffing and banging weights down on the floor. (Added to these factors are a plethora of other sexist issues. For example, some clubs do not induct women in the use of free weights.) It is hardly surprising that many customers, not just women, find it an unwelcoming environment. In many cases it takes a brave woman or man to enter this environment. However, it is women in any significant numbers who are most notable by their absence. This results in a "women not welcome" environment. All of this takes place under the watchful but blind eyes of the organisation. Although the reasons provided by some organisations' employees sound reasonable enough, actually some of them don't; for example, that women "do not like or want free weights", that "they use smaller, lighter weight elsewhere in the club", that "they prefer the machines" and the outrageous "it's too complicated for women in the free weights area". It is time for change. A 1970s culture still exists in many health clubs free weights areas. It does appear that society changed while the free weights section stood in a time warp. This time warp is a prison without walls for many women.

Moving to a value-supporting orientation allows blind spots like the ones highlighted above to be brought into sharp focus. In addition, it throws the focus firmly upon the customer as the seeker of value and the organisation simply as the value supporter. It moves organisations from being inward-looking to outward-looking. It requires an understanding of customers' lifeworlds. This simply means being conversant with how customers live their lives and how the organisation can strategically support the value customers seek.

We have looked at the notion of added value and how it can be viewed as an anachronism which offers little to contemporary strategic vocabularies. The 'build it and they will come' orientation leads organisations down damaging routes. Not considering women as value-seekers in relation to free weights areas has led some organisations to overlook them in favour of men. Viewing organisations as playing a value-supporting role rather than a value-adding role could help avoid such errors. Organisations should look outwards to how they can enable customers to find the value they seek.

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