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## Tech Training

How technology is changing weight training, and what it means for people who own health clubs and manage gyms

Michael Wood, CSCS

There isn't a facet of modern life that hasn't been improved, or at least altered, by advancements in technology. Refrigerators tell you when you're out of milk. Your car verbally directs you to "turn left" towards your destination. Self-service check-outs are popping up at your local grocery store, allowing you to scan your groceries as you move through the aisles and check out in an instant. Even the common toothbrush now has a computer to rotate the bristles for you while it times your morning cleaning. It seems only natural that strength training – historically involving just a human lifting metal – should also offer the benefits of efficiency through technology.

Along with the escalating role technology plays in daily life, trainers and gym owners have seen the face of the weight trainer change dramatically over recent years. Once upon a time, "weight lifting" was done predominantly by males under 34 for primarily aesthetic reasons. Now, women and baby boomers comprise a growing and significant percentage of resistance exercisers driven by health benefits and the desire to stay youthful and fit. However, these new users aren't as comfortable with traditional strength training equipment and have different inherent exercise preferences. Like their talking cars and electronic toothbrushes, they want their workout apparatus to do the thinking for them and instruct them on exactly what to do. And, they demand results and rewards for their efforts.

In health clubs, technology has met this need through personal trainer-driven exercise guidance. According to David Canter, National Director of Personal Training at Millennium Partners Sports Club Management, the company that runs Sports Club/LA and Reebok Sports Club, "We have started to see a lot of technology in the new equipment, more methods of monitoring the members workouts, and programming that is in the unit, or available for use with audio devices."

Companies such as FitLinxx and TechnoGym offer a way for personal trainers to guide clients through a prescribed workout program using a visual screen display, making it easier for members to workout on their own across multiple pieces of selectorized equipment. Koko Fitness takes this technology a step further, offering integrated exercise guidance on an individual computerized "smart gym". The company's Smartrainer® automatically customizes a multi-week training program based on the user's unique fitness goals and strength levels. A computerized "brain" guides them through time-efficient, 30-minute workouts, prescribing the right weight and providing real-time feedback to ensure users are training at the correct pace, with proper form at full range of motion. The Smartrainer dynamically adapts to the user as they grow leaner and stronger. Performance data is captured, tracked and reported back to the user through a personal web page.

This answers the needs of time-pressed adults like Art LaFlamme, who uses Koko at Beverly Athletic Club in Beverly, MA. "What I like most is the fact that Koko has a plan everyday and I don't even have to think about it, and it's always somewhat different! Koko makes sure that I don't cheat. [It] makes me do my best at all times, which can be tough on those days when you're not feeling your finest."

But, is the technology intimidating to an older, somewhat technically un-savvy new member base? Not at all, according to Canter. "As with everything 'different' the first pieces were looked upon with skepticism, but many of the new products are easy to use, easy to learn and are much better at interfacing with the member," says Canter. "I like to compare it to programming a VCR vs. using Tivo. When I changed my parents over, they were scared, but five minutes later, they were excited about how easy it was and how it was actually better than a VCR."

So what does this mean for gym owners and staff? When deployed properly, the new technology can lead to increased memberships, higher revenues per member, improved member retention and a strong return on investment. "The more progressive operators have begun to integrate technology in all aspects of the club, with strength training really being the last piece," said Canter. "The hardest thing is to tell a club that they need to spend money to make money, but in the case of [equipment like] Koko, there is a very exact and proven track record on how this happens. Many times owners look at adding Personal Viewing screens as a way to attract and keep members, but it is hard to know the exact impact. With Koko, it is immediate and very easy to see the return in real time."

For membership retention, it is critical for owners to keep clients engaged across all areas of their business, including classes, cardio and strength-training. In the past, members who were relatively new to strength training may have been intimidated at the thought of wandering aimlessly and alone through a maze of equipment in the free-weight area. For them, classes or cardio equipment may have been a more comfortable option where guidance, motivation and feedback were provided either by a human or machine. Now, strength training guidance through technology allows members to find even greater satisfaction and interaction than they would on traditional cardio equipment, taking the intimidation factor out of resistance exercising. The applied technology produces a more engaging workout, reduces boredom and helps to prevent results plateaus. When you add features like success guarantees, performance tracking and earnable points, strength training becomes increasingly attractive to new and existing members alike.

The gym of today is vastly different from the gym of five years ago, and the future promises even greater, more rapid advancement. As technology continues to penetrate the industry and clients become more tech-savvy, gyms will be required to provide members with equipment that gives them convenience, customization, ease and performance in the same manner they experience in all other aspects of their life. They'll expect their strength training equipment to not only talk...but to *listen*.

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Michael Wood, CSCS  
E-mail: woodspg@gmail.com  
Phone: 508-369-5430  
Fax: 786-513-2952

P.O. Box 2626  
Attleboro Falls, MA 02763-0895