A Digital Revolution in Health and Fitness Is Coming: How to Ride the Wave

By Denise Lee Yohn

Ten years ago a revolution hit mainstream America. Like a tidal wave, digital imaging crashed onto the scene with new products and new capabilities people had never even dreamed of before - and the CE industry rode the wave to great heights. Cool new CE devices transformed picture-taking into an everyday, fun, immediately-gratifying experience and CE software and service-providers made picture-sharing just as easy.

Today another revolution is coming and CE has another opportunity to be a part of a groundbreaking movement which will change the way people live. This time the sea change is in health and fitness and the impact will be no less significant than digital imaging’s revolutionary force.

Whereas digital imaging changed picture-taking from a memory preservation activity to an experience-enhancing one, health and fitness will grow out of its roots in curing and preventing disease and become about enhancing quality of life for all.

Whereas digital increased the use and penetration of cameras by expanding imaging beyond special occasions, digital will expand health and fitness maintenance beyond exercise sessions and doctor’s appointments and weave it into everyone’s daily lifestyles.

Whereas digital imaging involved more than a single device, digital health and fitness will also draw upon an integrated ecosystem of hardware, software, services, and content.

Certainly major strides have already been undertaken in the digital healthcare arena. IT providers are pushing frontiers in electronic medical records, mobile and remote care, and digital workflow management in healthcare organizations. But this represents only a portion of the full potential of digital health and fitness. After all, only a portion of people has healthcare needs -- everyone has health and fitness needs.

CE manufacturers can fill those needs with smart devices which people use to engage in activities from walking around the office to eating to sleeping, and to monitor their status and track changes. Software developers can create applications and programs which coach people and enhance their development. Service and content providers can produce healthy living experiences through services, information, and connections. The opportunities are endless and unknown.

So how do you get started? Follow the lead of those who fueled the digital imaging revolution and institute these three innovation practices:

1. **Fuel product development by observing lead users**
Early on in its development of digital cameras, Sony Electronics undertook an investigation of digital imaging early adopters—people who were already on their 2nd or 3rd camera at a time when most others were simply thinking about buying their first, and people who engaged in advanced applications, often homemade ones they’d pieced together by improvising with existing offerings.

By studying the role of images in these lead users’ lives and the ways they were interacting with digital images, Sony was able to uncover insights about the limitations of current devices and systems and to identify opportunities to pursue with future innovations. For example the company learned from lead users about the desire to seamlessly move from image capture to print which led to innovative developments in media, integrated software, and printers.

In the same way, CE companies should look to early adopters of digital health and fitness products and services. Identify what they’re using and how, observe the pain points they experience and the workarounds they’ve cobbled together.

Observing lead users is a little like looking into a crystal ball—it reveals needs and behaviors which eventually emerge in the mainstream and gives you a leg up on developing products which fit them.

2. Innovate around the person, not the technology

The temptation with any development in technology is to use the new capability as the starting point for innovation. But this often leads to developments which fall short of or are off base from what end users want and need.

HP took a different approach to digital imaging and used its target consumers as the starting point for its innovation agenda. It developed personas and drafted narratives to paint rich, detailed pictures of its targets’ lives and to document all the possible points where HP’s products and services might serve a role.

In doing so, the company identified potential far more meaningful—and numerous—innovations than if it had used a new sensor or CCD as a jumping off point.

Digital health and fitness could benefit from a similar approach. Since a person’s health is integral to his/her life, day-in-the-life profiles of different target segments would reveal multitudes of opportunities for digital health and fitness offerings.

3. Develop partnerships and strategic alliances to expand your footprint and your innovation landscape

Although Kodak may have slow to eschew film, it actually led the way in one aspect of digital imaging. Back in 2001 Kodak purchased oFoto, an online photo-developing service, only months after it, and other online imaging services like it, had launched. In doing so, Kodak was able to expand the footprint of its brand.
into new services and offerings and to stake out new ground early on which gave it a competitive advantage.

In today's collaborative, open-source business environment, it makes even more sense now to develop partnerships and strategic alliances. Partnerships can not only deliver additional capabilities but also lend credibility to your innovations.

In particular there are many health and fitness brands with deep market insights and strong customer relationships which would make powerful partners for CE companies. Nike and Apple have proven how successful such a partnership can be with their hugely popular Nike+ sensor system. The key is to tap companies with a lifestyle view.

Above all else, CE companies need to see digital health and fitness as the ripe opportunity that it is. When digital imaging first emerged, some looked at the opportunity through the narrow lens of the camera market and failed to see how it could grow substantially; others dismissed it as a passing fad. But those whose prescience led them to pursue it, enjoyed a great ride to the top and have stayed leaders in the field.

May you be as savvy with digital health and fitness -- and ride the next wave of revolution in the industry.

Denise Lee Yohn has been inspiring and teaching companies how to operationalize their brands to grow their businesses for over 20 years. World-class companies including Sony and Frito-Lay and extraordinary CE brands like Denon and McIntosh Labs and have called on Denise, an established speaker, author, and consulting partner. Contact Denise. Read more by Denise.