

# CLUB INDUSTRY

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## Health Clubs Use Sophisticated Advertising to Create Connections

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Whether they are advertising on a website or on TV, all club owners face the same challenge: how to connect with their audience.

For the most successful campaigns, it all starts with a great brand, says Denise Lee Yohn, author of "What Great Brands Do."

"They're connecting beyond a specific product," she says. "They're tapping into people's emotions and aspirations. And they create more of that emotional and personal connection that people are looking for."

Recently, companies such as Equinox, New York, and Planet Fitness, Newington, NH, are doing just that. With the "Equinox Made Me Do It" and "No Gymtimidation" taglines, respectively, both have advertising campaigns with a consistent, strong identity that engages their audiences, says Casey Conrad, president of Communication Consultants Inc.

"You need to make it fun," she says. "I've been saying this for years. We're in a business where we're asking people to come in for torture. We have to find a better way to engage customers to say, 'Hey, that's really funny...I'll go try them out.'"

Higher-end clubs are especially starting to market in a different way, often in a more daring way that is focused on getting people's attention, Conrad says. It is a shift from the traditional method of focusing mainly on the price of products or services.

"Price advertising will only get you so far," she says. "You've got to engage people and go after the market segment."

For Planet Fitness, that segment is the 80 percent to 85 percent of people who are not currently members of gyms. The franchisor's ads use humor to relate to people who might be intimidated to go to a gym, whether they are afraid they cannot keep up with an aerobics class or will not look as fit as the other people in the locker room. The ads target the type of members who would be attracted to the brand—those who want to exercise and get fit at their own pace.

"I think in the past a lot of health clubs have taken the car dealer tactic, where it's all about shouting and heavy promotion," says Steve Red, president and chief creative officer at Philadelphia-based Red Tettemer + Partners, which created the Planet Fitness ads. "Planet Fitness has taken a more strategic and focused look at what they want to be and created advertising about that. That's ultimately why they have a more sophisticated look because they're doing everything around that central belief."

According to Jamie Medieros, vice president of marketing at Planet Fitness, the company communicates

that brand message in a variety of mediums, including TV, radio, digital and social media.

"We're always evaluating our media mix and remember to show our brand personality in our advertising and not take ourselves too seriously," she said in an email.

## Targeting Specific Audiences

For Equinox, that personality is typically provocative. With this year's "Equinox Made Me Do It" campaign, the ads show athletic-looking people getting into trouble, with one ad showing a close-up of a young man with a black eye. Equinox representatives declined to be interviewed for this article, but a press release from the company last December explained the reasoning behind the ad: "The moments captured exude a sense of rebellion. Lowered inhibitions and playful naughtiness are the side effects of living a more provoked life."

The company promotes the theme across digital, print and social media with the hashtag #equinoxmademedoit.

The company's higher price point allows it to be more selective in whom it targets, and therefore, the message can be more sophisticated, says Jay Schwartz, president of IdeaWork Studios, an interactive advertising agency that has offices in New York, Las Vegas and Santa Barbara, CA. The agency has worked with several fitness brands.

"Equinox's ads are not literal; there's almost a subliminal association with the gym," Schwartz says. "So that speaks to a certain audience: people who can choose to afford to go there. The target demographic for that brand is familiar with the fact that Equinox is a gym and that they're a high-end gym."

Of course, not all health clubs have the budget to run sophisticated campaigns like Planet Fitness and Equinox do, but the two campaigns are an example of how advertising in the industry is changing, particularly in promoting the message in both traditional and digital advertising, says Guy Dineen, founder and chief strategy officer for Dallas-based Brand Figment, an ideation and strategy agency for brands.

"[Equinox and Planet Fitness] not only are doing smart things with search advertising and landing pages, they've had a really great content and social media strategy," he says. "They have a strong and powerful brand message that's clear and concise across all channels, whether it's traditional or digital, and it's making everybody take notice."

Today, clubs have the opportunity to target their message to more specific audiences than ever before through digital advertising and social media. Whereas 20 years ago, business operators could run an ad in a magazine and hope that the right audience saw it, digital channels give club owners a better chance to know who their audience is and put that message in front of them, Dineen says.

"If I go to the Planet Fitness website, start to sign up and then leave, they're going to send me advertising in other places," he says. "It's that ability to target the message to the right person at the right time."

Conrad says that although the industry is starting to use digital advertising to reach its audiences, it still lags other industries as club operators figure out how to divert their attention away from traditional methods such as direct mail. In the future, Conrad predicts that higher-end clubs with services and programming will shift even more toward engagement marketing.

"I think you'll start seeing clubs reaching out and engaging people and helping them to start thinking about

fitness, not because it's \$9.95, but because I can control my diabetes, get my blood pressure down, whatever the case may be."

But before they take on digital media, clubs should figure out their identity and message. In other words, know what differentiates your club from the competition, Yohn says.

"Without that core, you can advertise all you want, and it's not going to produce results," she says. "I encourage brands to think about what they're offering that's meaningful, differentiating and valuable to people, and then how they use media and technology to communicate that."

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