

Breaking Into the Corporate Fitness Market

Career Path: Find out how to set up a win-win relationship with a corporation.

by Grace DeSimone

Many companies are looking to the fitness and wellness industry to assist them in improving employee productivity and morale, reducing healthcare costs and absenteeism and offering a competitive edge.

As a fitness professional, you can bring your fitness expertise, programming ideas and creative energy to a company and become their resource for health and exercise. Corporate fitness programs can be a lucrative and rewarding addition to your existing work schedule or an excellent path to starting your own business. Here's how to begin.

Dream

Imagine the typical corporate environment. Picture folks hunched over a computer most of the day. Add deadlines, stress and inactivity. How many program ideas can you conjure up that counteract inactivity and stress? How can these programs enhance the employees' health and productivity? (For program ideas, see "Sample List of Services" on page 108.) You can start a corporate program with one yoga class or a comprehensive list of programs.

Consider other professionals you might like to collaborate with to offer packages of services. Your "dream team" can include massage therapists, registered dietitians, yoga instructors, physical therapists or anyone who offers a service that complements yours. If you are a personal trainer, hook up with an instructor and vice versa. The more people you collaborate with, the more resources you have to offer. This widens the scope of services you can potentially offer to a company and makes you more appealing.

Create a Plan

Once you have a better idea of what you can offer and how you can offer it, make sure you look at yourself as a businessperson. If you are not prepared to answer questions and your ideas are not well thought out, you will find it difficult to sell your program. Writing a business plan will help you organize your business and is a required part of your presentation package to a corporation.

The plan serves as a template, but you will customize it for clients to meet their needs. Do your homework and develop a plan that complements each company's culture. Understand its primary business, how many employees it has and what, if any, type of fitness program it offers. Much of this information can often be found on the company's website under employee benefits.

If you have a myriad of ideas running through your head, it's best to pare them down into a realistic plan. The following is a light adaptation of a business plan to help you discover what you can offer and how to present it. Writing a plan may seem a bit daunting at first, but once you get started the information will flow. For more tips on devising a plan, see the Small Business Administration's website (www.sba.gov).

Components of a Business Plan

Complete as much of this information as you can.

Executive Summary. Highlight the content of the plan. Although the summary comes at the beginning of your plan, create it *after* you have defined the other components.

Company Description. Describe your company. Include a mission statement and your history in the health and fitness field.

Services. Describe products or services you can offer. Be as specific and descriptive as possible.

Market Analysis. Demonstrate your understanding of the marketplace. What do your competitors offer? What do your clients' competitors offer? How do you measure up? Why should you be the preferred choice?

Strategy and Implementation. Provide specific objectives on how you plan to implement your program and how you will track success. Include details on what kind of equipment you need and what the cost will be to the company. Provide information on what type of space you will need—what is ideal and what is doable.

Measurement. Include information on how your program(s) will improve employee productivity, morale and overall health. How do you measure, analyze and report return on investment (ROI) for the company? You can measure against industry statistics and employee feedback surveys, pre- and postfitness testing and utilization data (number of participants, repeat participants, etc.)

Marketing Plan. How will you promote your services? Fliers, electronic mailings, free seminars, a health fair to promote services and a company Intranet are good choices. If you have marketing samples, include them.

Developing Relationships

Relationships are your key to success, but it could take months or even years to nurture a corporate relationship. Networking is the most important tool you have. Develop relationships with as many people as possible. Be professional, helpful and sincere. These contacts will become the engine that drives your business. Here are some networking ideas for getting your foot in the door.

Word of Mouth. The most effective and least expensive advertisement is word of mouth. Ask clients about their companies. Gauge their interest in starting a program at their workplace (providing it is not a breach of your employee contract with a facility). Having a champion inside the company who can guide you is the best resource available.

Learn Who's Who. Ideally, you want to have an audience with the director of human resources or benefits. However, if you can get to a person higher on the totem pole, that's even better. You can locate contact information on the company's website or by calling the company. Offering a free lecture as a community service is a great way to get a foot in the door because it is a win-win situation for both you and the company.

Also, read local business papers for information on top executives. You may learn that a key person in a corporation plays golf, jogs or windsurfs. Most physically fit personnel will appreciate what you have to offer. If a company has a cafeteria, find out who runs it. It is usually an outside vendor. This vendor may be able to provide some inside information regarding who he or she reports to, and that person is typically the same one you will need to contact.

Equipment Vendors. Make friends with your local equipment vendor. Find out which companies are installing gyms and how they are planning to staff them. Many companies have unstaffed gyms. Even if they have a staff, perhaps you can augment their services by providing programs such as personal training or group classes on a fee-for-service basis. You can offer services through the equipment vendor to give free equipment orientations to these companies or even strike a deal with the equipment vendor to be an extension of its service.

Architects. You can also offer your services to architects to assist with equipment placement, choices and traffic flow. If they are doing business with any corporations, you may be able to get into the corporation through the architect.

Fees and Legal Considerations

Although not as exciting as devising programs and classes, making sure you set your fees at the right price and protecting yourself legally are key to your success.

Pricing. Don't price yourself too low. Companies will value you more if you charge more. Determine your prices before you contact a company. Factor in your costs for commuting, preparation, marketing and music. If you teach a class, create a minimum and maximum participation range and price accordingly. Avoid having employees pay by the class, because you will never guarantee a salary for yourself. Instead, price sessions with a beginning and ending date and sell a set number of sessions. Ask the company if it is interested in subsidizing the program or providing a partial subsidy. If the business offers a monetary benefit to encourage employees to join a health club, find out if employees can use that fund for your services.

Legal Matters. You absolutely need your own liability insurance. Even if a company chooses to employ you, it is prudent to have your own professional liability insurance. Also, keep your certifications up to date and do not offer any programs that are outside your scope of services. Avoid bringing in equipment that is not in your original plan and that you have not told the company about. If someone gets hurt doing something the company is not aware of, it can create a litigious situation.

SIDEBAR: Sample List of Services

What products can you provide for corporations? Use these ideas as a place to get started.

Screening

- Physical Activity Readiness Questionnaire (PAR-Q)
- health history questionnaire
- health risk appraisal
- fitness testing

Programs

General Programs.

- Walk Off the Weight
- walking club
- fitness classes (step, toning, cycling, etc.)
- specialty classes (yoga, Pilates, tai chi, qigong, kickboxing, Nia)
- equipment orientations (if a fitness center exists)

Specialty Programs

- prenatal/postpartum fitness
- fitness and nutrition combination
- special populations programming (diabetes, hypertension, obesity, arthritis)

Energy Breaks

- meeting stretch breaks
- chair massage
- desk stretch
- office yoga
- mediate and meditate

Customized Programs

- posture and ergonomics
- employee team-building activities

Education

- Pedometer Walking—Every Step Counts
- How to Start a Walking Program
- Weight Loss and Exercise
- How to Choose a Fitness Center
- Exercise Myths Debunked
- Nutrition and Weight Loss
- How to Train for a Marathon
- The Fit Family ■

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