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Facility Spotlight

BY ANNE B. MCDONNELL, SENIOR EDITOR

From Failing to Fabulous

Loggerhead Fitness made a complete transformation after a new owner took over.

WHEN RICK Opton bought Water Front Fitness in 2005, "it was clearly nearing its end," he says. The original facility opened in 1993, and fewer than 400 members remained from its peak of 2,000. "The facility was run-down and dirty, had 12-year-old equipment, and unmotivated and unprofessional staff. ... Those members who remained were bitter from seeing a business get run down to the dirt. ... Members were screaming for refunds, no one trusted me and the place was losing thousands of dollars each month," Opton says.

In addition, there was plenty of competition. There are at least nine other fitness facilities within 6

miles of Loggerhead Fitness. Says Opton, "Members had choices, and the ones who defected found new homes quickly." What a way to start a business.

However, Opton, through creativity and industry experience, was able to turn the facility around. Opton realized that he had to completely change the facility's image. The old name, Water Front Fitness, was no longer a positive one in the community. "Since Juno Beach is well known for the Loggerhead and Green turtles that come to shore each spring to lay eggs, I chose to go with the turtle theme. I created a new logo and new color theme," he says.

Next, he bought all new cardio equipment. "This set the tone. It showed the remaining members that we were serious about making changes. The biggest hit with our members were the eight personal TVs that we installed on stands. ...

Few of my competitors offer personal TVs," says Opton. The next thing he did was clean the facility. "We scrubbed and buffed, ... replaced tile, painted and did a full makeover."

Even a brand new fitness center can't survive without great staff, so Opton got to hiring. He was able to bring back key group instructors who had big followings, plus the previous general manager who had worked at the facility during its peak years, and who had a great reputation with many of the core members.

Technology also played an important role in this transformation. Opton upgraded all the computers and installed new software. He also implemented a system to track and follow up on walk-ins, and to communicate with current members and prospects. "Email marketing was key," Opton says. "I taught the staff how to capture email info. In fact, I tied compensation to this. If a contract was turned in with an incomplete or illegible email address, I would not pay commission until it was fixed." With these email addresses, the facility sends out "thousands of intelligent, professional-looking emails. My open rate is high, and I can get the word out about anything from changes in my schedule to what is new at the gym," says Opton.

Once key improvements were made, "we knew we had to let the community know we had changed," Opton says. The facility had articles written about the upgrades in local newspapers. Opton also sent out a "We Want You Back" postcard to all past

members. "To this day, we continue to see a steady trickle of past members who are coming back to us."

Current members are constantly updated about what is going on in the fitness center. "We have an entire wall devoted to bulletin boards for all our events and programming. Each coordinator ... keeps their bulletin boards fresh with interesting news and tid-bits," says Opton. "Communication is what sets us apart."

In three years, the fitness center has completely turned around. "We now have reached the 1,200-member mark, and our EFT has more than tripled since I took over," says Opton. In addition, Loggerhead Fitness was recently voted the best club in the Palm Beaches and Treasure Coast area, in a contest sponsored by the local ABC TV affiliate. Loggerhead beat out 26 other facilities for the title.

The success of Loggerhead is the result of plenty of hard work, but also comes from a simple but important motto. Explains Opton, fitness centers "can't differentiate themselves much by the equipment they offer. What creates the big differentiator is the 'experience' members have. We see ourselves as being ultra-friendly and ultra-clean. ... Our attitude, personnel and effort we put into our club keep things vastly different than my competitors." **FM**



Loggerhead Fitness

Juno Beach, Fla.

561 625-3011;

www.loggerheadfitness.com

Date fitness facility opened: In 1993 as Water Front Fitness; in June 2005 as Loggerhead Fitness

Fitness facility size: 7,254 square feet
Number of members: 1,200

Group exercise classes: 33 per week, including Silver Sneakers, Step, belly dancing, tai chi, Cardio Pump, group cycling, yoga, and Matt & Ball Pilates

Extras and amenities: Massage, personal training, ballroom dance socials, yearly member appreciation party, new-member "goodie bag," prize-based referral program

To have your fitness center featured, send an email describing your facility to anne@fitnessmanagement.com.