

Exercise Consumerism – Let the Buyer Beware!

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How much money is wasted each year on exercise and weight loss gimmicks that fail to produce results? How many people purchase exercise devices or buy into the latest fad in an attempt to reap the benefits of exercise without making the effort necessary to attain these goals? These are difficult questions to answer, but the general consensus among exercise experts is that too much money is wasted, and too many questionable products are purchased.

Fitness professionals and educators who complain that too many Americans do not participate in regular exercise attribute this inactivity to a lack of motivation. The authors propose that the problem is not purely motivational, but, largely, educational. The American public has not been taught how to be discerning consumers of exercise information. So when typical sedentary Americans get the urge to exercise, they turn to tabloid magazines, infomercials, and so-called exercise experts" to determine what to do, what to buy, and how much to spend. They frequently make uninformed decisions about exercise. It should be no surprise then, that sedentary individuals develop a bad taste for exercise when they realize that the things they have been trying do not work and the money they have spent has not helped them to fulfill their expectations.

Most people realize that they should be exercising. They also seem to know the benefits of regular exercise and proper nutrition. What is lacking is the knowledge of how to exercise properly, how to make healthy food choices, and the realization that there are no quick fixes or miracle solutions. In this article, we provide readers with suggestions about how they can become (and teach others to become) informed consumers of exercise information.

Suggestions and Guidelines

How do fitness professionals and educators determine what works and what doesn't? And how can they better prepare their clients and students to become savvy exercise consumers?

First Step: Education

The best method of becoming an enlightened exercise consumer is to educate -ourselves about exercise and about exercise products and programs. Although we, as fitness professionals and educators, may know a great deal about exercise, we should never reach the point where we think we know everything. Learning is a lifelong process. We should remember we can always learn something new, even in areas in which we consider ourselves expert.

To excel professionally and to prepare clients and students for a lifetime of healthy exercise, fitness professionals and educators must learn to differentiate fitness fact from fiction. We need to teach our clients and students where to find exercise, information and offer them appropriate advice and suggestions. Teachers should integrate instruction about exercise consumerism into their health and physical education curricula. Fitness professionals should discuss with their clients the pros and cons of the various exercise products available on the market. Fitness professionals and educators can encourage their clients and students to bring advertisements to their exercise sessions or classes to discuss whether or not the products advertised bring about, the results they claim. It is helpful to keep a file of advertisements and articles on exercise products. When concepts of fitness are discussed, clients and students should be instructed not

only how to exercise properly, but also how to evaluate the various products being marketed to improve fitness. Fitness professionals and educators can more effectively teach individuals how to differentiate between fact and fallacy by constantly evaluating which products produce advertised results. Staying abreast of the latest research available on exercise equipment, gimmicks, and industry trends is a necessity.

The most reliable sources for information on exercise and fitness are peer-reviewed articles, published in nationally recognized professional journals. These journals use a blind review process to reduce the likelihood that bias will occur in article selection. The blind review process also helps establish credibility. Fitness professionals and educators also should look for publications where the authors and reviewers have no monetary interest in the product being tested.

Individuals who do not have access to professional journals or who find the scientific writing style difficult to read and understand should refer to textbooks, newsletters, and research reviews published by professional societies or faculty at universities. Table I lists selected publications that summarize exercise research and provide a more readable explanation of how the research may be applied.

A third potential source of information on exercise products is the local college/university physical education/exercise science department. While not all departments have a faculty member versed in exercise fraud, someone should be able to provide insight into what makes sense and what seems fraudulent. A basic understanding of how the body works is invaluable for understanding the limitations of various products.

Finally, newspaper columns on exercise and wellness may provide useful information on exercise products. One must be careful however, to make sure that the author of the column is truly a fitness professional or educator and not an agent for the product or just someone with a casual interest in exercise.

Second Step: Be aware that fraudulent products exist – Question everything!

The second most important suggestion for becoming an informed exercise consumer is to always question claims made by advertisers promoting a product. Do not always believe what you read or hear. Marketing firms know what buttons to push to turn us into brain-dead impulse buyers. To become an educated exercise consumer, you must adopt the mindset that nothing works unless it is proven to you, it is documented by peer-reviewed research, and it stands the test of time. Several common advertising techniques (or gimmicks) that raise a red flag include:

1. **Testimonials.** The exclusive reliance and overuse of testimonials and other emotional images including "before and after photos," the "I've tried everything else" approach, and the "It worked for me" approaches usually indicate a lack of substantive evidence that the product really works (Corbin & Lindsey, 1994; Kleiner, 1992).
2. **Money-Back Guarantees.** Money-back guarantees, especially for those advertised products that are only guaranteed if entire systems or programs are followed in addition to the product being advertised, should be suspect. Additionally, clauses that require the user to adhere to a comprehensive health and fitness regimen usually indicate that it is the exercise or lifestyle program that really has a chance of bringing about the results you seek, not the miracle product (Corbin & Lindsey, 1994).
3. **Cures or Miracles.** Claims that seem too good to be true without requiring the user to abandon the negative lifestyle behaviors (lack of exercise, poor nutrition) that have caused the need for a "cure" are indeed usually too good to be true and won't bring about the advertised results ("Miracle Cures and Other Frauds," 1990).
4. **Celebrity Endorsements.** Celebrities and professional athletes (whose credentials are limited to personal experience and success in their profession) may give the impression

that they know something about fitness, but in reality they probably know less than for which they are given credit. Being blessed with good genetics (looking good) does not necessarily equate with being knowledgeable about fitness and nutrition.

5. **Foreign Research.** References to research conducted in other countries (in America we hear of studies" conducted in Europe, while in the rest of the world they hear of studies' conducted in America) should be analyzed carefully. This strategy indicates that the advertisers either cannot find supportive re- search at home, or wish to make it difficult to verify the validity of the research to which they refer."
6. **Mass Media Marketing.** The mass media are used to promote products which claim to have , .proven' results from research that may have been conducted, but which have not been published in peer-reviewed journals. Additionally, poor scientific method may have been applied (e.g., results from a culture dish may be inferred on a grand scale to be applicable to the entire human organism). Without access to an unbiased review of the product, consumers can never be sure of what they are getting.
7. **Buzzwords.** The use of buzzwords such as 'secret,' 'miracle,' 'rapid,' or an advertisement that claims a nebulous cure-all for "good health" indicate that the advertisers either do not know what their product will do, or do not want the consumer to know about its limitations (Corbin & Lindsey, 1994; Kleiner, 1992).
8. **Omission of Facts.** Advertisements that omit the mention of any side effects or restrictions should be questioned There are almost al- ways side effects and restrictions for certain populations. If side-effects or restrictions are not mentioned, expect that extensive research has not been conducted on the product.
9. **For Your Eyes Only.** Suspect the worst if the advertiser states that the ingredients in the product may only be known by the producer or a handful of "scientists,' or if they ask the consumer to keep the product a secret from skeptics. The product probably contains ingredients that are known to be ineffective or those that are potentially harmful.
10. **Highly Pedigreed.** If the developers claim to have studied at prestigious institutions, don't always accept this as fact. It may only mean that they walked on a campus or know where an institution is located. It does not always mean that they actually studied somewhere legitimate or that they ever received a degree from the institution. In addition, when individuals who refer to them- selves as "doctor,' 'exercise physiologist," or "nutritionist,' it does not mean that they have ever studied exercise, fitness, or nutrition in an accredited institution. It is not un- heard of for a developer of a product to exaggerate or falsify credentials. If you are not sure, call the institution or contact the professional organization in which this person should be a member.
11. **Conspiracy.** if the marketing strategy relies on attacks on scientific institutions and the medical profession as co-

Table 1. Exercise and Fitness Publications

1. Physical Activity Today

Published by the Research Consortium of the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD), 1900 Association Drive, Reston, VA 20191

2. Sports Science Exchange

Published by Gatorade Sports Science Institute, PO Box 9005, Chicago, IL 60604-9005; (312) 222-7704

3. Penn State Sports Medicine Newsletter

Published by The Pennsylvania State University, Subscription Fulfillment Department, PO Box 3073, Langhorne, PA 19047-9377

4. University of California, Berkeley Wellness Newsletter

Published by Health Letter Associates, PO Box 420176, Palm Coast, FL 32142

5. Tufts University Diet and Nutrition Newsletter

PO Box 57875, Boulder, CO 80322-7857

6. Consumer Reports

Subscription Department, PO Box 53017, Boulder, CO 80321-3017

7. Physical Activity and Fitness Research Digest

President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, Room 250, 701 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20004

conspirators desirous of keeping the product off the market for their own benefit, be cautious (Corbin & Lindsey, 1994). The scientific and medical communities do not speak with one voice. They are made up of many different individuals with differing points of view. If a product truly worked, it would be impossible for the medical and scientific communities to keep it a secret or keep it off the market.

12. **Symptom Free.** Many products advertise the treatment of symptoms, but do not treat the underlying cause of the symptoms. The temporary relief of symptoms should not be confused with solving the problem that brought the symptoms on in the first place or the long-term effectiveness of the product (Kleiner, 1992).
13. **Express Mail.** Many companies will only ship through private mailing services. This is done to circumvent the federal restrictions on mail fraud. If a product is shipped through the US Postal Service and is determined to be fraudulent, prosecution for the federal offense of mail fraud is likely. Private shipping services offer no such protections.
14. **Redundancy.** Many products on the market work, it is just that they are frequently unnecessary. The abdominal exercise gimmicks are good examples. The message conveyed is that the machine will do the work for you. In reality, you do not need to buy the machine; you can get the same results doing crunches, curl-ups, etc. The money spent on the machine is money wasted. A recent comic strip highlights this issue by showing a character that states, "I bought an exercise machine and I'm still lazy" (Adams, 1996).

Third Step: Don't Depend on Others to Protect You

1. **How can advertisers make these claims if they do not work?** Legally, all advertising has to be honest. Most companies and products do meet the guidelines for truth in advertising. Some do not. The problem is that the agencies responsible for policing advertisements tend to be understaffed and under funded. Therefore, they focus their efforts on the products that generate the most complaints (Complaints mean angry voters. Angry voters threaten the job security of government employees and politicians). In addition, marketing executives can be very clever. They will frequently place disclaimers in advertisements in such a way that they are overlooked or not understood by the buyer. Classic examples include ads that prominently proclaim how a product can do everything for everyone, and then in small print a disclaimer states that the product will only result in weight loss or improved fitness if combined with a healthy diet and regular exercise routine. Obviously, what is really effective is the healthy diet and regular exercise routine. The product itself is usually an unnecessary additional expenditure.
The other way companies get around truth in advertising problems is to wait until legal action is taken against them, settle out of court, and then alter their advertisement in a minor way. They use the modified advertisement to market their "new and improved" product and have the luxury of time before they are threatened again with legal action. Because governmental resources and personnel are spread thin, settling out of court saves money for the governmental agency pressing the case. Frequently, the end result is that the same people who have marketed use-less products in the past are marketing useless products again.
2. **Why do seemingly intelligent people fall for this stuff?** A cognitive understanding of how to be an educated consumer of exercise and fitness information is important; however, this is not always enough. Many individuals are susceptible to refined messages that play to their emotions and desires. In a society that functions on an instant gratification basis, many rational people are susceptible to believing in things that they otherwise know do not work. Too many people seek the fountain of youth and the miracle cure. If an alluring message is presented during a moment of weakness, seemingly intelligent individuals often buy into the idea that miracle products just might work.

Fourth Step: Know Where to Turn for Useful Assistance

A number of agencies and professional organizations can be contacted in order to verify the track record of various products (see table 2).

How does one determine whether a product works? It is best to proceed with caution as the exerciser considers taking the plunge into home exercise equipment (Consumers Union, 1996). Frequently, exercise devices end up as clothes hangers or garage sale items. You can help your clients and students minimize the possibility of that happening if you suggest that they try out various kinds of equipment before they make a purchase. Table 3 contains suggestions for making an informed decision.

If your clients or students decide that they want to purchase some home exercise equipment, they should be prepared for some harsh reality. Most people probably cannot afford any of the machines they might have tried out at the health club, since such professional equipment generally costs thousands of dollars (Consumers Union, 1996). Second, the very cheapest equipment is neither desirable nor very effective (Consumers Union, 1996). If they shop carefully - and if they are willing to spend several hundred dollars, they can at least find well-designed home exercise equipment that "I give them a good workout (Consumers Union, 1996).

It is the responsibility of fitness professionals and educators to assist individuals in making informed exercise and fitness choices. These choices extend to the purchase and use of products that have proven effective and the elimination of those products that are shown not to work. The most effective method for eliminating exercise fraud is to provide consumers with the skills to differentiate between what will work and what will not. If fitness professionals and educators can teach people not to spend money on fraudulent products, fraudulent products will cease to exist. Caveat Emptor-Let the Buyer Beware!

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Table 2. Sources of Information

1. Professional Organizations

- American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD), 1300 Association Dr., Reston, VA 20191; (800) 213-7193.
- American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), PO Box 1440, Indianapolis, IN 46206-1440; (317) 637-9200.
- American Council on Exercise (ACE), 5820 Oberlin Dr., San Diego, CA 92121-3787; (800) 234-9229.
- American Dietetics Association, 216 W. Jackson Blvd., Suite 800, Chicago, IL 60606; (213) 899-8626.
- American Hospital Association, 840 N. Lake Shore Dr., Chicago, IL 60611.
- American Medical Association (AMA), 535 N. Dearborn, Chicago, IL 60610.
- American Pharmaceutical Association, Health Education Service Center, 2215 Constitution Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20037.
- National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA), PO Box 38909, Colorado Springs, CO 80937; (719) 632-6722.

2. Governmental Agencies

- Consumer Information Center, Dept. 5C, Pueblo, CO 81900.
- Consumer Product Safety Commission, Washington, DC 20207; (800) 638-8326.
- Federal Trade Commission, Bureau of Consumer Protection, Division of Advertising Practices or Division of Food and Drug Advertising 6th Street and Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20005; (202) 326-2222.
- Food and Drug Administration, Office of Consumer Affairs, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 5600 Fishers Lane, Rockville, MD 20857; (301) 443-6066.
- Fraud Division, Chief Postal Inspector, U.S. Postal Service, 475 L'Enfant Plaza, Washington, DC 20260.
- National Council Against Health Fraud, PO Box 1276, Loma Linda, CA 92354-1276.

3. Consumer Organizations

- Council of Better Business Bureaus, 4200 Wilson Blvd., Suite 800, Arlington, VA 22203; (703) 276-0100.
- Consumers Union of the U.S., Inc., 256 Washington St., Mount Vernon, NY 10550; (914) 664-6400.
- The National Consumers' League, 1522 K St. NW, Suite 406, Washington, DC 20005.

4. Business Organizations

- National Sporting Goods Association, 1699 Wall St., Mt. Prospect, IL 60056; (708) 439-4000.
- Health Insurance Institute of America, 1025 Connecticut Ave., Suite 1200, NW, Washington, DC 20036; (202) 223-7780.
- Public Affairs Pamphlets, 381 Park Ave., South, Room 1101, New York, NY 10022.