

BOOK

TREND WATCH

Unconventional group fitness classes are helping club owners create excitement, boost revenue and increase retention in their facilities.

By Amy Florence Fischbach, contributing writer

Students swing around weighted wooden swords and try their hand at Samurai sword training moves during a weekly class at Reebok Sports Club/NY in New York City. The class, which is named Forza after the Italian word for strength and power, improves students' cardiovascular fitness level, mental concentration and muscular endurance, says Diane Gausepohl-Karpus, group fitness manager for the 140,000-square-foot Reebok/NY.

By offering unconventional group fitness classes, clubs can shake things up, energize the instructors, create excitement and keep their members motivated, she says.

"Sometimes clubs let things get stale or allow an instructor to stay in the same time slot for years," Gausepohl-Karpus says. "You need to change things up and take chances."

More club owners are taking chances with the types of group exercise classes they offer, says Petra Kolber, an IDEA Fitness spokesperson. She has noticed a trend that more clubs—from big chains to boutique facilities—are offering innovative classes.

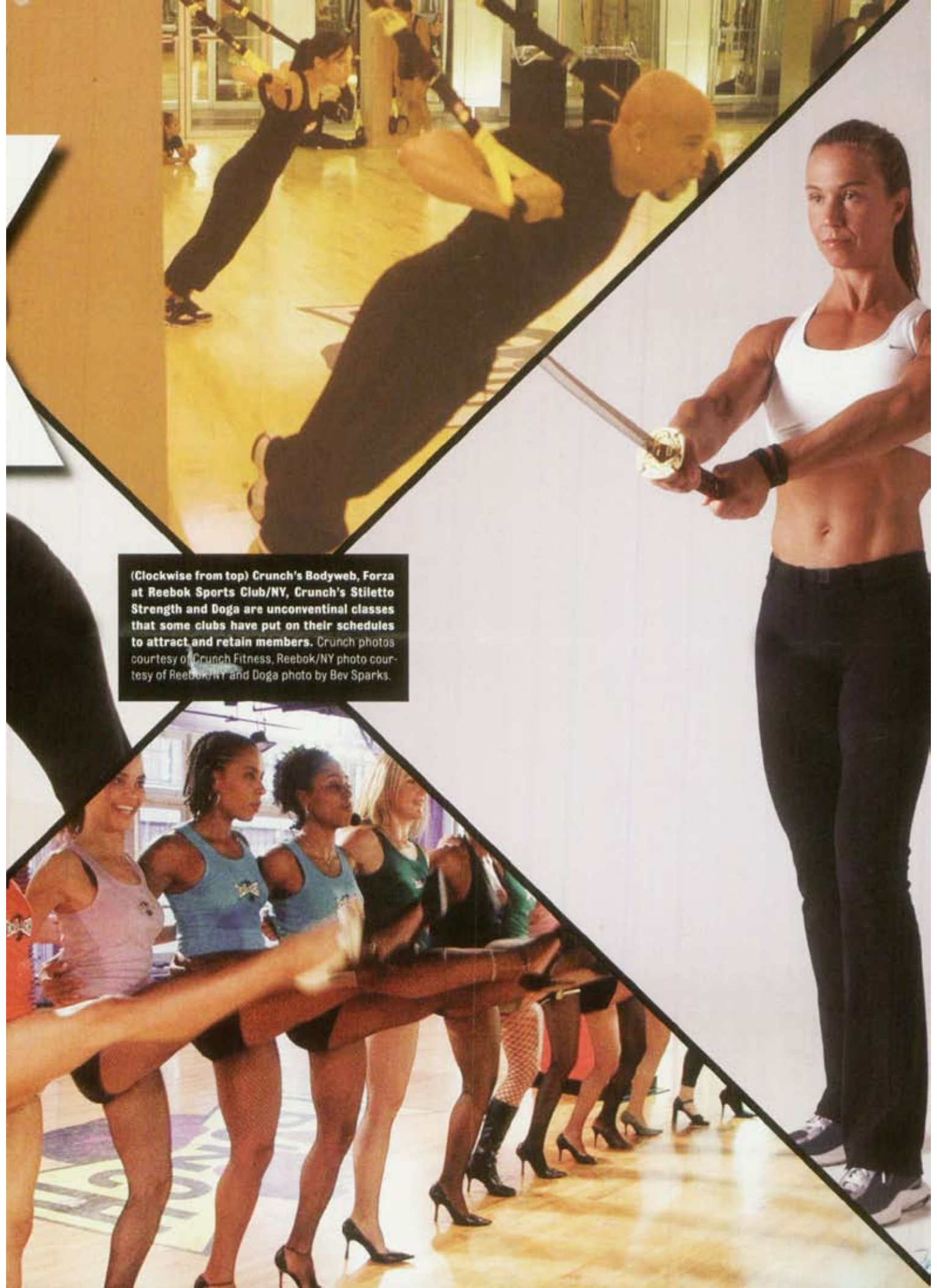
"It comes down to member retention," she says. "The more we can create programming that is appealing to current members and those thinking about joining, the better."

Performance Tracking

Out-of-the-box classes can boost revenue and retention if executed successfully, but if they fizzle rather than sizzle, they may not stick around on the schedule for long, Kolber says. In the past, clubs gave new exercise classes time to grow, but that is no longer the case, she says.

"Before, if a class wasn't full in the first month, it wasn't automatically taken off," says Kolber, a group fitness instructor at Equinox in Santa Monica, CA, and Spectrum Athletic Clubs South





(Clockwise from top) Crunch's Bodyweb, Forza at Reebok Sports Club/NY, Crunch's Stiletto Strength and Doga are unconventional classes that some clubs have put on their schedules to attract and retain members. Crunch photos courtesy of Crunch Fitness, Reebok/NY photo courtesy of Reebok/NY and Doga photo by Bev Sparks.

Bay in El Segundo, CA. "Now, there's so much competition that clubs don't have the luxury of allowing as much time as needed to keep formats on."

Keeping or dropping an unconventional group fitness class is often a numbers game, she says. If class attendance starts off strong and drops off suddenly, then the class may disappear from the schedule prematurely. Classes that thrive, however, may start off as a test program but evolve into a staple on a group ex schedule.

To ensure a return on investment, Reebok/NY tests out unconventional group fitness concepts during its Open Mic Night on the first and second Thursday of each month.

"We don't like to throw something in [the permanent schedule] in a do-or-die situation and let it sit on our schedule for 12 weeks if it's not working," Gausepohl-Karpus says. "If our members like it, we'll find a spot for it."

When Kolber worked at Equinox in West Hollywood, CA, the club took a similar approach by keeping a slot open on its group exercise schedule every Sunday called the Master Class Special. If a class generated a lot of interest, then the club added it to the schedule in the next quarter. If not, then it could disappear, she says.

To determine whether to keep or to drop a new class format, clubs are turning to software programs that can pinpoint the percentage of a club's members who are in the studio at any one time. Clubs also often require instructors to write down their own class numbers, as is the case at Reebok/NY. The club, which regularly runs reports, allows three months for a new class to build numbers. If a class starts off with low attendance but slowly increases, the club will give it more time on the schedule.

"We have an attendance expectation for all classes," Gausepohl-Karpus says. "If a class does not have enough members to be considered a group experience, it will be taken off the schedule."

The Embarcadero YMCA in San Francisco, which has 5,000 membership units and offers 103 classes per week, follows a similar protocol for its unconventional classes. The branch attracts an average of 15 to 17 students in most prime-time classes. If the attendance continually falls below five

Group Fitness Classes that Step Beyond the Basics

1. Childhood Games. Club members can travel back in time at Crunch during its Recess class, which puts the play back in fitness.

2. Inner Diva. Adding classes in pole, belly and chair dancing can add an edge to a club's group ex schedule and give members a challenging workout.

3. Suspension Training. Crunch developed a BodyWeb class based on suspension training, in which exercisers work out every body part on a hanging apparatus.

4. Martial Arts. Karate and Tai Chi are now becoming staples on many clubs' group ex schedules. Reebok/NY is also offering a class called Forza, an empowering workout using wooden swords.

5. Upper-body Cycling. A new concept called Kranking, pioneered by Spinning creator Johnny G, provides a cardiovascular workout for the upper body.

6. Dance. In addition to all the "Dancing with the Star"-inspired classes, other dance/music-based classes are springing up. Julie Hecker, a former club owner and fitness industry veteran, teaches her Punk Fitness class at Detroit-area community recreation centers and at nightclubs, bars and a bowling alley. During a typical class, punk rock music blares on the stereo as women swing hula hoops around their hips, dance and jump rope. Hecker created the Punk Fitness class as an alternative to the traditional high/low aerobics classes set to the tune of Top 40 hits.

7. Mind-Body. Crunch has put a new spin on yoga classes with offerings such as Sunrise Salutations, and Hot and Cold Yoga, but perhaps one of the more unconventional mind/body classes is Doga or doggie yoga, which is popping up in animal-friendly locales around the country. Brenda Bryan, a Seattle yoga instructor, teaches Doga classes at the Seattle Humane Society. By pulling together two things that people love (yoga and dogs), she says that she's able to pull in participants who may not otherwise exercise.



Julie Hecker, owner of Punk Fitness, uses hula hoops along with jump ropes in her group ex classes, which are set to punk music. Photo by Queen Bee.

students, then a red flag is raised, says Ross Goo, fitness director for group programs at the Y. Before dropping the class, however, he considers several factors, including the time slot, day of the week, format of the class, seasonality and the instructor.

"We have a lot of studio space, and for us to risk only serving a few, it's not worth it to us," Goo says. "That being said, there are times of the day where an above average of five students would be hard to garner, such as in the middle of the afternoon."

Goo evaluates the facility's classes and instructors every six months. Other clubs revisit their schedules every quarter. Crunch Fitness schedules all of its classes in three-month intervals. At the end of each quarter, Donna Cyrus, senior vice president for programming at Crunch, performs calculations to determine whether classes are trending up or down. If a class continually

brings in strong attendance, she considers pushing it out to other markets, but if the attendance trails off, then the class may move off the schedule or into a different time slot with a new instructor.

Many clubs try to capitalize on the latest group fitness trends, but overcomplicated choreography, an unpopular instructor or a lack of attendance can lead to a class's downfall. Other times, overexposure in the mainstream press can cause a class to fade away. For example, Crunch Fitness' signature Stiletto Strength class, which taught women to walk in high heels, was hot in the beginning, but members tired of it quickly, Cyrus says.

"They got turned off by having a lot of media in the studio every week," she says. "We pulled the program back, took it off the schedule, and we'll bring it back annually in the fourth quarter of our schedule."

Out of the Box

Return on Investment

Although not every class will ultimately succeed, some unconventional classes have consistently brought in high attendance numbers and even additional revenue for a club. To cover the expense of training specialty instructors and buying accessories, some clubs are charging their members for specialty classes or offering fee-based private or group sessions. For ex-

Seven Ways to Infuse Energy into Your Group Exercise Schedule

1. Carefully target your demographics.

It may be tempting to add a class in belly dancing to a conservative group exercise schedule, but first study your members' ages, interests and ability levels to determine if it's appropriate.

2. Select a creative name. Although a creative class name is important, the name should make it clear to attendees what to expect. For example, Crunch names its cycle classes *Ride* and its Boot Camp class *Circuit City*.

3. Change up the location. Instead of holding all of your classes in your group ex studio, take your boot camp class outdoors in the summer or schedule a yoga class by the pool.

4. Vary the time of day. By selecting a different time slot for your class, you can generate excitement for the program and boost attendance during slow times at your club.

5. Ramp up the intensity. A Pilates Mat class at Heavens Fitness in Calgary, Canada, turned out to be a flop, but by making the workout more advanced and renaming it *Pilates Infused Core*, the class is now full.

6. Hire quality instructors. A class can have the perfect time slot, concept and music track, but if the instructor isn't well trained and charismatic, it may not fly. The individual walking into a room and up to the front of a class can change the energy of a room, says Petra Kolber, spokesperson for IDEA.

7. Play live music. Rather than always pumping music through your sound system, consider bringing in live musicians or DJs. For example, Crunch offers an African dance class with live African drummers, and DJs spin tunes once a month for classes at Heavens Fitness.

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ample, Crunch charges \$199 for a private pole dancing session, which can accommodate up to 20 exercisers for bachelorette parties and birthday celebrations.

At Reebok/NY, one-third of the facility's 9,000 members participate in group ex programs. Innovative classes, private triathlon training and one-on-one yoga classes drive sales and increase revenue, Gausepohl-Karpus says.

Heavens Fitness in Calgary, Canada, also drums up revenue from its 15 five-week specialty classes. About 40 percent of nonmembers who participate in specialty classes eventually sign up for a membership, says Helen Vanderburg, the co-owner.

"It allows nonmembers to come into the facility without making an obligation to a long-term membership," she says. "After trying out a class, they often feel comfortable with the club and are ready to try out other programs and equipment."

For the past four years, the 22,000-square-foot boutique club has offered 15 specialty classes per week on a five-week rotation. The 25-year-old club charges \$40 a session for members and \$60 for nonmembers. The clubs' most successful five-week programs have been *Hula Hooping*, a class with weighted hoops; *Chicks With Sticks*, a martial arts class using inexpensive, lightweight wooden sticks; and *Ladies Night*, a combination of *Strippercise*, chair dancing and pole dancing.

The most popular class hands down has been *Ladies Night*, she says. The participants use weighted body bars as a pole, and, as they move them around, they get a strength training workout, she says. The class can take 35 people and sells out everytime, Vanderburg says.

Unconventional classes demand hours of instructor training, and in some cases, special equipment, but they can also drive membership sales, increase retention, and at the end of the day, help members reach their goals in a fun, safe and effective way.

"All clubs have the ultimate goal of providing an environment that will encourage sales and retain membership," Gausepohl-Karpus says. "Group exercise accommodates the needs of many members at one time. If a class is successful, it creates a buzz, and it energizes the whole club." ■