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FITNESS

A New Place to Strong-Arm Givers: The Gym

By NORA ISAACS

FOR three weeks, sweet-talking solicitors greeted gymgoers in the lobby of the Atlantic Club in Manasquan, N.J. They were not peddling personal training sessions.

Instead, a handful of volunteers clad in matching T-shirts and red hats stopped members to promote the club's latest charity drive, the Valentine Plunge, a benefit for Lou Gehrig's disease. Members who slipped by without receiving an information packet or the soft-sell pitch couldn't miss the slew of posters advertising the fund-raiser, which ended up collecting \$100,000.

"You reach so many people in one little area," said Jim O'Neill, 47, a gymgoer and the event organizer. "These guys are all affluent people who are willing to help. Where else would I have that command of attention?"

The gymgoers who were stopped in the lobby were asked to take a dip in the chilly Atlantic Ocean and to wrangle friends and family to sponsor the stunt. The more the volunteers raised, the more prizes they would receive: a beach towel for bringing in \$500, a robe adorned with the slogan "Jump In and Feel the Love" for \$1,000.

As gym memberships swell, a vanguard of owners has begun to mobilize customers to contribute to charity. The most committed clubs have hired so-called outreach coordinators to encourage the clientele to donate; others have employees spread the word about an upcoming fund-raiser one treadmill at a time.

Such efforts, owners hope, will burnish their brands while making it convenient for the time-pressed to get involved.

Rick Caro, a consultant to more than 200 health clubs, said that the push represents the maturation of gyms. "Only in the last decade or so has this really grown into being a significant \$15 billion industry," he said. "Clubs now realize they have an opportunity, and maybe philosophically an obligation, to really be more than just four walls to the people who are members."

In recent years, club owners have tried to reposition gyms as community centers that provide social gatherings, after-school programs, and, yes, options for charitable giving — think [Y.M.C.A.](#) with an upscale twist.

Presenting members with opportunities to give to charity is a way of demonstrating that in addition to providing an exercise haven, clubs "are seeking to be good citizens," said Paul G. Schervish, the director of the Center on Wealth and Philanthropy at [Boston College](#).

Charitable giving is on the rise at local clubs and national chains alike.

Last year, the members and staff of the Claremont Club in Claremont, Calif., raised \$20,000 to aid 17 local families, up from \$2,500 in 2003 when its Adopt-a-Family program helped four. This month, an event called Workout for the Cure, designed to raise money for breast cancer research at two Sport and Health locations in Gaithersburg, Md., attracted around 700 people and garnered \$40,000 — \$10,000 more than the previous year.

Some chains also offer matching programs. After Hurricanes Rita and Katrina, 2,700 Curves franchises donated just under \$1.5 million, which Gary and Diane Heavin, the founders of the women's clubs, matched for a total of \$3.1 million.

The jump in donations is credited, in part, to the record number of baby boomers who are joining health clubs. In 2005, 8 million members were older than 55, up from 4.8 million in 1998.

“Boomers see themselves as wanting to continue to affect society, even with their dollars, in ways that they once sought to do so by their activism,” Mr. Schervish said.

But promoting charitable causes can be viewed as an intrusion by people who go to the gym — or a dark Spinning studio — to escape. In the run-up to a Spin-a-thon for the AIDS Research Alliance last year, the event was promoted during classes.

“It's definitely a challenge to get members involved,” said Shelly Alifano, the director of member and community relations at the Courtside Club in Los Gatos, Calif. Sometimes, she said, members are less than eager. “People are looking to get away from the day-to-day-stresses of life,” she said, “and to come here and be hit with all of the same things you are getting in your mail and your workplace can be discouraging.”

It can rankle when a member rushes to the gym only to find the parking lot is full, the pool is closed for a benefit or the desirable machines are tied up by disabled children, as is sometimes the case at the Claremont Club. “You have to be careful,” said Mike Alpert, its president, speaking of such events. “They are not real members paying real dues.”

Every member of Healthworks, a chain of five women's gyms in Boston, gives to charity. Since 2002, Mark Harrington, its president, has set aside 1.25 percent of dues, or about \$200,000 annually, for the Healthworks Foundation, which supports a nonprofit gym for homeless women and pregnant teenagers. A staff outreach coordinator schedules members for shifts at the nonprofit gym as well as at other local organizations that benefit women.

A few weeks after calling the outreach coordinator, Melodie Knowlton, 28, a graduate student in Brookline, Mass., found herself chopping cantaloupe at Rosie's Place, a homeless shelter. “Some volunteer work, you have to do a long orientation or commit to six months or a year, which makes it a higher barrier to wanting to help out,” she said after her first time. “For me, the major thing was the ease of it.”

Convenience also drew in Rich Conn, 50, an Atlantic Club member who committed to the Valentine Plunge after a volunteer swayed him. “It was one-stop shopping,” said Mr. Conn, a plastic resin salesman from Spring Lake, N.J.

Others feel an obligation. “Some people are annoyed at being asked to give in a gym setting,” said Hugo Schwyzer, 39, a college professor in Pasadena, Calif., who has been approached in his indoor cycling class at LA Fitness. “My feeling is that those of us who can afford gym memberships and afford time to work out are fortunate and we have an obligation to give back.”

Even if gymgoers ignore the rising din of solicitations — as plenty do — making charity giving part of a gym’s culture still makes business sense.

“It’s a terrific marketing idea,” said Eugene R. Tempel, the executive director of the Center on Philanthropy at [Indiana University](#) in Indianapolis. “Studies show that if people have a choice to deal with an organization that is philanthropic versus not, about 75 percent of people prefer the philanthropic organization.”

Pat Laus, the owner of the Atlantic Club, wants to streamline how gyms mobilize their members. She is creating a step-by-step manual and videotape to explain how she got about 300 members to raise \$508,000 for the Avon Foundation, a charity focused on domestic violence and breast cancer.

Next month, she will present the program, Clubs for the Cure, and give it away free at a conference of the International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association, a trade group.

Clubs still have a long way to go in terms of tapping into the generosity of their members. In December, the Sport and Health clubs delivered 2,000 gifts for Toys for Tots, representing just 2.5 percent of 80,000 members from more than 20 clubs. And the Claremont Club has sometimes enticed members to donate with raffles for free facials or training sessions.

Even the most time-honored tradition — the holiday food drive — doesn’t always inspire all-out participation. As part of a nationwide drive, anyone dropping off a can of food last year at a Crunch location received a guest pass.

“I didn’t do it, because I kept forgetting,” said Alan Igelman, 37, a management consultant in Manhattan. “I wanted to,” he added. “Not out of the goodness of my heart. I wanted to get a pass for my friends.”

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