

HARMONIC CONVERGENCE

LOCAL FITNESS BUSINESSES' GOALS DOVETAIL WITH EMPLOYER/WORKER INTERESTS – IN COST-EFFECTIVE WAYS

By Beth Probst

The cost of health insurance is top of mind for many employers right now, and health care issues are making headlines daily. While there is no quick fix for these challenges, a number of Duluth businesses are committed to creating an environment that encourages healthful living.

Services range from 24-hour fitness centers to yoga over lunch or a series of trail runs. Regardless of their variety of services, these businesses share one thing in common: a willingness to work with employers in hopes of building their customer base while making Duluth a healthier community.



At the Duluth Running Company, owner Clint Agar has found his niche by helping create a community for runners. “Regardless of whether they are advanced or beginner runners, one common thing we see among customers is a longing for community,” Agar said. “They want to know how to connect with other runners in the region and once they find that connection, many would agree that we have an awesome running community.” To assist in this effort, lists are posted for informal running groups at the Duluth Running Company. One that is gearing up right now is the marathon training group, which can see anywhere from 50 to 100 people participate. These groups are also posted online.

Since taking over Duluth Running Company a few years back, Agar has also focused on sponsoring or partnering on races within the Twin Ports and providing support for regional nonprofits that want to put on events. “In addition to raising money and helping build a healthy community, it is our way of giving back to the community,” he said. Some of his favorite events include the Gobble Gallop on Thanksgiving and the Trail Race series that takes place in the spring. The Trail Race series includes six to seven races and explores some of the wonderful trails in Duluth. Each race costs only \$1 to participate in and anywhere from 100 to 175 people participate.

Agar expects these numbers to keep

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Clint Agar, Duluth Running Company

on growing. One thing he notes both locally and nationally is that during every recession, running tends to see a huge boom. He credits this boom to two reasons: “First, running is a relatively inexpensive hobby—something you can do without a gym membership. And when people are down, they seek out ways to fulfill a need for happiness. Running gets your endorphins going, which helps boost your mood.”

The nearby YMCA shares the Duluth Running Company’s mission of building stronger communities. For its staff, this means trying to offer something that just about anyone can enjoy. “We really aim to offer activities that anyone from 4 months to 90 years old can participate in,” said Gina Miller, Duluth YMCA’s membership and marketing director. This includes family nights, which really encourage the entire family to get out and enjoy each other’s company.

Family bonding or even getting more involved with the community is



all part of YMCA’s mission in building healthy, strong communities. “For us, wellness includes spirit, mind and body,” said Miller. “If someone wants to just work out, they certainly can, but they also have the option of getting more involved.” Involvement can range from volunteering on a project to serving on the board – but ultimately it is providing a venue for folks to get connected while being active in the community.

As a nonprofit, the YMCA also works to ensure that fitness and wellness programs are affordable, regardless of



individuals' financial situations. "With the current economic climate, a lot of people are looking closely at their expenses and having to make tough decisions," Miller said. "We want to make sure that health and wellness isn't something that gets cut." In just the past two years, the financial assistance program at the YMCA has tripled.

Health and fitness often brings to mind sweating at the gym, but the Spiritual Deli in Duluth wants you to think bigger. "Wellness is about the entire being," explained Hillary Buckwalter, Spiritual Deli director and instructor. "To be happy, one must step back and look at the big picture." To accomplish this, Spiritual Deli focuses on the intersection where creativity and fitness cross.

In addition to traditional yoga classes, the Spiritual Deli operates similarly to a community center. To accomplish this, the center allows a number of



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Gina Miller, YMCA

community groups to utilize the space and is also a revolving art studio. "Each month we have an art opening which includes live music and wine," said Buckwalter. "The artists' work is then left up in the studio for a month for members to enjoy." The revolving artwork provides new inspiration to members while helping get the word out about the Twin Ports' strong arts community. Buckwalter said that by taking a holistic approach to wellness, the end result is "healthier and happier employees," which is what many employers desire.

This desire is resulting in some regional employers asking for studios to take their classes on the road. At Yoga North in Duluth, director and instructor Molly McManus said this is a growing trend, with multiple organizations asking them to bring workshops and weekly yoga classes to their location. "Yoga helps build happy, healthy employees," McManus says. "It is a long-lasting, systematic approach to wellness. This helps ensure employers have healthy employees." Yoga North is also seeing an increased demand for providing courses for teachers, along with conducting weekend-long retreats in the region.

Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week and five locations in the region set Anytime Fitness apart from other gyms in the region. Owner Jinell Abernethy said convenience is key, given how busy people's lives have become: "We're definitely getting more requests to speak to employee groups about the benefits Anytime Fitness provides, given our regional reach and being open all of the time."

Abernethy also said she is also seeing more employees taking advantage of a popular health insurance benefit



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Hillary Buckwalter, Spiritual Deli

among many major providers that provides membership reimbursement if you attend a gym regularly. While this has been a growing trend for the last five years or so, she's now seeing members pushing their employers to keep this benefit, despite rising health care costs.

Another thing members are pushing for is more efficient workouts. "We're seeing a strong demand for AMT [adaptive motion trainer] machines because it provides a wider range of motion for your stride and more options in workout routines," Abernethy noted.

In addition to reimbursements, Anytime Fitness motivates members by offering a variety of challenges throughout the year. For example, the holiday hold-out challenge encouraged members to not gain more than two pounds between



"IT IS A LONG LASTING, SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO WELLNESS."

Molly McManus, Yoga North

Thanksgiving and Christmas this past year. Winners received a t-shirt, but more importantly, maintained a healthy lifestyle.

The variety of health and wellness centers in our region is something employers are embracing. Common partnerships range from health and wellness businesses presenting at business health fairs, partnerships providing reduced membership costs and, most recently, fitness centers taking their training to an employer to provide on-site fitness classes.

One thing's for sure: The competitive market means there are plenty of cost-effective partnerships for employers to provide a benefit to their employees. It really is a win-win situation for all involved, because employers have healthier employees at a marginal cost while supporting local businesses. **D**

Beth Probst is a freelance writer and communications officer at the Duluth Superior Area Community Foundation.

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