

Five Keys to a Successful Pilates Mat Program

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Pilates has become a mandatory offering for any fitness club that wants to lead in its market. The numbers tell the story. In North America, Pilates participation increased by over 445% in just the last three years*. The number of clubs offering Pilates increased by 530% over the last seven years**. This growth is projected to continue.

Many clubs launch their Pilates programs with group mat classes. Mat classes incorporate the fundamentals of Pilates, but require no investment in equipment. Consequently, most clubs offer mat classes free to members. As the program matures, many clubs invest in Reformers and generate revenue from fee-based programming.

Although clubs use mat classes as an entry into Pilates, Pilates matwork is *not* an entry-level workout. In fact, mat classes are as difficult as, or *more* difficult than, equipment-based classes. Poorly taught mat classes result in members who are disappointed, bored, or – worse – injured.

A well-run Pilates mat program, on the other hand, attracts and retains members. It also acts as a springboard to fee-based Pilates equipment training. Members who have a positive experience in your mat program are more likely to participate in equipment-based training later on, adding to your club's bottom line.

Here are five keys to success in Pilates mat programs:

1. Commit to ongoing instructor education.
2. Keep the classes fresh and challenging.
3. Expand and adapt your mat program.
4. Provide an appropriate mind-body environment.
5. Inform your entire staff about your Pilates program.

1. Commit to ongoing instructor education

Group exercise instructors face different class dynamics every day, and know how to train groups of varying shapes and sizes. However, the extensive range of Pilates exercises and styles requires that group training go further. The best mat instructors are those who continually learn about the many intricacies and nuances of Pilates. If you're serious about a successful mat program, you must commit to ongoing instructor training.

Mat class participants usually range from de-conditioned to fairly fit. How can the class be successful for everyone, regardless of condition? The instructor must be able to *modify* the exercises to suit members' individual abilities. More advanced students can, for example, lift the head higher or extend the legs to make the exercise more challenging. Participants with less strength can make slight adjustments and still get a good

workout. Again, instructor education is essential for success.

2. Keep the classes fresh and challenging

As with any group program, it's important to keep the class lively and fresh. Props such as resistance rings, foam rollers and balls offer a simple, inexpensive way to spice up a mat class. For each prop, your instructors can offer a wide variety of new exercises to challenge the class.

A socially competitive, yet supportive, atmosphere also keeps class interest high. Good mat instructors foster environments where members feel accountable to fellow classmates: making sure they attend class, do each exercise to the best of their ability, and encourage each other to reach the next milestone.

3. Expand and adapt your program

Pilates offers remarkable benefits to virtually all member demographics. Be creative about developing classes to appeal to segments within your membership. Do you have golfers, baseball players, tennis or racquetball players? Pilates can help them excel at their game. What about older adults? Pilates is great for building bone density and also improves flexibility and balance. New moms? Pilates can help them get back into shape.

You can also tailor your marketing to promote the benefits of Pilates to member segments. "Power your serve

with Pilates,” for example, could be part of a marketing piece that promotes the benefits of Pilates to tennis and racquetball players.

4. Create an appropriate mind-body environment

Pilates is a mind-body exercise requiring concentration and focus. The setting should enhance the experience. Create a quiet, relaxing and aesthetically pleasing environment.

Not every club has an ideal setting available, but enhancements can be relatively simple. If you have bright overhead fluorescent lights, turn off some of them and invest in a few floor lamps. Play music that reflects the desired atmosphere. If possible, keep the class in a tranquil area, away from the noise of your step or cycling classes.

5. Inform your entire staff about your Pilates program

It is critical that your entire staff – especially the front desk and other instructors – be knowledgeable about the specifics of your Pilates program. Use email or in-person updates to keep everyone informed. Meet regularly with your Pilates instructors to discuss ways to improve and promote the program. Encourage staff members to attend demonstration classes to gain a better understanding of the benefits of Pilates.

These five keys will give your mat program a solid foundation for success. Build on them using creativity and innovation, and you’re on your way to providing truly exceptional Pilates programming. Your members will respond!

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