

Danny Fryer asks why at some clubs members are viewed only as sales targets, or as an inconvenience.

A gym! A gym! My kingdom for a gym!

Okay, so I don't have a kingdom and I've just taken liberties with Shakespeare but, seriously, what does a guy have to do to get a good gym around here?

These days we seem to be stuck between a rock and a hard place, with the rock being corporate fitness chains (where a desire to market more effectively has replaced a commitment to fitness) and the hard place being council-run fitness centres (where sheer bloody-mindedness, dirt and dust bunnies seem to prevail). And believe me, I should know, I'm currently paying for both. Let me explain.

I'm a member of one of the leading London-based gym chains, and have been for a few years. I was initially attracted by their no-nonsense, no-frills approach to fitness and the fact that, not only was their equipment new and in good working order, but that their staff seemed to be well-motivated and knowledgeable.

Sadly, over the years, the motivated and knowledgeable staff have been replaced by lacklustre and blank-faced automatons, while the knowledge and focus on fitness has been replaced by marketing and the hard sell.

Overnight, sticky labels appeared, proudly proclaiming that "Freedom is a Lifestyle," while the gym equipment itself began sporting "introduce a friend" reward cards.

Then the main counter began to heave and buckle under an ever-increasing plethora of weight-gain protein shakes, energy bars and isotonic sports drinks—which the staff are more than keen to try and sell you (keener, it seems, than promoting fitness, or even dusting, so I presume commission is a factor in the sales) – as well as branded gloves, towels, goggles, plastic cups, back packs and T-shirts.

At one point a garish gym-branded classic Italian automobile took up valuable floor space as part of a branch-wide promotion.

And while on the subject of floor space, in a bid to maximise it and/or efficiency, the staff are under orders to move the gym equipment around more often than a bored housewife with an OCD rearranges the living-room furniture.

Having got that off my chest, the two things that have raised my hackles the most are membership and fitness classes.

With the former, all members used to have a credit card sized show and scan membership card. Then a marketing device called the

"Freedom Tag" was introduced.

Membership costs what membership costs (rates vary) but, available only to those members who pay by direct debit, the Freedom Tag (a branded dog-tag affair) gets you a discount at, among others, Vidal Sassoon and Strada. It also gives you a percentage discount off the various over-the-counter products, a discount not available to any non Freedom-tag holding members who, incidentally, are paying similar prices for membership (only not by direct debit).

The tag is a stupid gimmick that I, personally, would not be seen dead sporting around my neck but, my beef is this: if the gym offers product discount to one member, it should offer it to all, regardless of the type of membership card they carry.

And now, on to the fitness classes: I have, for the past five months and more, been trying to get a Boxercise class off the ground. Many members are keen to have one. The gym's current manager seems keen too. Sadly, he is all mouth and no trackie bottoms.

At his insistence, I have twice emailed the gym employee responsible for exercise classes and have twice been completely ignored. Despite my complaints at this, the manager

says he "doesn't want to get involved" and would prefer me to deal with it, which is offensive on two fronts.

Firstly, as I am paying nearly £50 a month to be a member, I don't expect to be ignored by a gym employee and, secondly, for the same reason, I don't believe it's my place to motivate staff to set up a class that members are already clamouring for. To add insult to injury, the gym currently employs a fitness instructor who is also a qualified box-

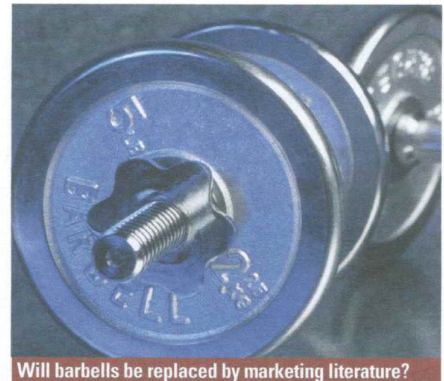
ing instructor.

And so, for all these reasons, I decided that it was time to move on, but where to?

I decided to try a council-run recreation centre, which was definitely a no-frills affair, would cost less than my current gym, and had the added benefit of being just a five-minute walk away.

I took out a temporary one-month membership for £30 to see how I liked it, before committing to full-blown membership. And, I'm jolly glad I did.

The gym itself was more filthy than I had realised, and the equipment more dodgy and archaic than I first thought. But it was cheap, so I thought I would make do. Every day for five days, I went to the gym, signed in,



Will barbells be replaced by marketing literature?

exchanged my temporary membership card for a locker key, did my workout, took the key back, got my card and left.

On day six, the employee guarding the locker keys told me that, as a temporary card holder, I wasn't allowed to use the gym lockers. Instead, I was supposed to use the insert-one-pound lockers located next to the swimming pool, two floors down.

I explained that this rule had never been explained to me and that I didn't have a pound on me, but the guy wasn't having any of it. He wanted to me to go back home, and get the pound.

"Not an option," I said. I showed him the book where I had been signing in, each day, for my key and said, that if he let me use a gym locker that day I would, as of the next day and forever after, bring a pound and use the other lockers.

I thought this was a reasonable solution but, alas, he did not. "Fine," I said, "I will just have to carry my bag around with me today." But that was also a problem, as it too was against the rules.

"Then give me an option," I asked through gritted teeth. "You won't give me a locker key, I don't have a pound and I'm not going home to get one." He wouldn't or give me an option, so I began my workout, bag by my side.

An altercation involving ever-fraying tempers on both sides, as well as other members of staff then followed which was finally settled by me being allowed to carry on, bag at my side, for that day only.

Somehow, I don't think I will be taking up full membership. Which leaves me stuck with my current gym, where I will no doubt one day bulk up under an ever-increasing load of marketing information but, sadly, never take up boxercise.

Unless anyone knows of a reasonable alternative in the Brixton area, that is. While there may not be a kingdom in it, there will certainly be my undying loyalty, plus the good sort of PR that only comes from word of mouth.

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