



# Physical Therapists Have What It Takes

## *Meeting the Health and Fitness Needs of Americans in Challenging Times*

By Michael Weinper, PT, MPH

### Executive Summary

*Paradoxically, fitness and prevention are in demand during difficult economic times. The time may be more right than ever for physical therapists to take advantage of these trends.*

**T**he current recession has hit Americans hard. Not only are their wallets suffering, but their health is taking a hit as well. To save money, millions of Americans are skimping on health care services.

A survey by the National Business Group on Health (NBGH) reveals the following:

- ▶ Twenty-seven percent of respondents chose not to receive health care treatment to save money on co-payment/coinsurance costs.
- ▶ Twenty percent skipped taking a prescription medication dosage as prescribed by a doctor.
- ▶ Seventeen percent split a prescription drug dosage in half to make it last longer.

On the other hand, health improvement is more of a priority than it was last year, despite the recession. Overall, 58 percent of employees have taken action to improve their physical health over the past year, according to the NBGH.<sup>1</sup>

What's fueling the demand to for physical fitness in these recessionary times? One reason may be that the economic downturn is providing tough motivation for many people to reevaluate their health status, according to John Commins, an editor with HealthLeaders Media. Commins notes that as people get older, many realize that they need to start taking care of themselves—eat healthier foods, lose weight, quit smoking, and manage stress.<sup>2</sup>

Stress caused by the economic slump may also be propelling people of all ages to health clubs. In fact, the International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association notes that during the last three months of 2008, as the recession kicked in, club membership actually increased.<sup>3</sup> And gymgoers are not just twenty- and thirty-somethings, but also Baby Boomers—a group of people who are highly motivated to look and feel younger than their years.

### The Right Idea at the Right Time

Today's physical fitness enthusiasts face some potential barriers in their quest for wellness:

- ▶ As the population ages, more people are likely to have chronic illnesses or injuries that must be considered in their fitness regimes.
- ▶ Injuries are more likely to occur in an exercise program that is not supervised, or that is not overseen by a qualified individual.

- Cost is still a factor for most people; individual fitness training can be expensive.

Recognizing the value that qualified, trained health care professionals can provide to address all these needs, PTPN launched Physiquality, a national network for health and wellness services, in 2008. Based on consumer research, Physiquality was developed as an “umbrella” brand for cash-pay health, fitness, and wellness services offered by providers belonging to PTPN, the nation’s largest network of independent private practitioners.

Here are the stories of two physical therapists capitalizing on these trends.

### **Ann Duffy, PT, MA, Duffy & Bracken Physical Therapy**

Soon after she launched the GRAVITY® system from efi Sports Medicine two years ago, Ann Duffy’s New York City practice saw an increase in new patients from referring physicians, word of mouth, and the surrounding neighborhood. The program, which was one of PTPN’s first partners under the Physiquality initiative, combines the GTS® machine from efi Sports Medicine with programming for group strength-training sessions, personal training, Pilates, and post-rehab.

Duffy initially considered renting a larger space, but decided to have an architect reconfigure her office by borrowing square footage from a large waiting room to accommodate four GTS® machines. She now has one machine in the clinic and three in the fitness room. “It’s a fantastic workout in just 30 minutes because it challenges you in a way that regular equipment doesn’t,” says Duffy.

For physical therapists who are considering cash-pay fitness services, Duffy says, “Go for it. You have something new to tell everyone, and doctors love the idea that you’re using evidence-based methods to get patients stronger after rehab. It’s the right direction for physical therapists to be going in right now.”

### **Bryan Soulie, PT, River Region Rehab**

Bryan Soulie, owner of clinics in Luling and Destrahan, LA, needed ways to diversify his income and decrease dependence on referrals. A few years ago, he decided to go with Catz sports performance programs, another Physiquality partner, which has general fitness programs for children and adults, and sports performance training programs for athletes of any age. “We could get a business model that provided branding, marketing, plus hands-on training that would give us structure, support, and networking with others,” says Soulie.

After his training at the Catz facility in Boston, Soulie began looking at opportunities to work with athletes, teams, camps, and schools in his community. That led to him running a pilot program for 50 fourth-graders to supplement their traditional



## **CORNER THE MARKET**

**Assess your reception area. Are papers and files stacked all over the front desk? Do you have dog-eared paper signs taped to the desk and walls? What about those magazines from 2005? Remember that little things make a difference when it comes to first impressions.**

physical education. The program was designed to be fun for the children, help them interact in new ways, and put them in a better mood in the classroom. Since then, Soulie has implemented other programs for both children and adults, and also offers evening classes in the clinic for children eight to ten years old.

“It’s not hard to make your money back,” says Soulie. “Just doing the school pilot program allowed us to recoup 60 percent of our start-up costs.” An added benefit of offering the programs, he says, has been more referrals to the rehab side of his business. He suggests that physical therapists who are thinking of offering this sort of program look at the benefits across the board. “It’s an opportunity to offer cash-pay services, expand marketing to new target audiences, and create brand awareness in your own area.”

Today’s consumers are increasingly receptive to paying for health and wellness services offered by their physical therapists—professionals they trust. The private practitioner is well poised to meet the consumer demand for solutions to improve health, relieve stress, and cut costs in today’s recession and beyond. ■

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### **References**

- <sup>1</sup> National Business Group on Health Survey, “The Recession’s Toll on Employees’ Health,” May 29, 2009.
- <sup>2</sup> John Commins, “Recession Provides ‘Teachable Moment’ for Wellness,” *HealthLeaders*, June 1, 2009.
- <sup>3</sup> Carolyne Zinko, “Bay Area Gyms Roll With Punches of Recession,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 23, 2009.