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No-frills gyms answer to low-cost workout trend

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In a no-frills economy, a no-frills gym seems just the ticket — enough torture machines and barbells to get the job done, to keep the calories in check.

But the recession brought a bit of a surprise on that issue. In the immediate wake of the economic breakdown in 2008, a surprising number of Rochester-area residents chose to keep their fitness club memberships. They foresaw, rightly, that letting one's body go is perhaps not the best response to the depletion of a retirement fund or even a job loss.

Many of the local clubs maintained their clientele or even added people. The spinning classes kept spinning. The juice bars stayed busy. The Rochester Athletic Club completed a \$1 million Henrietta expansion in 2009 and the company, one of the largest fitness chains locally, said it would add jobs.

But the region has been slogging through a recession and jobless recovery for three years now. No-frills fitness is having something of a belated renaissance.

When the new year turned, Kari Williams, manager of client relations at World Gym on East Avenue, said she noticed fewer prospective members coming in for their walk-through.

"I figured some of them



CARLOS ORTIZ staff photographer

Bert Fehrenback, left, of Rushville, Jim Meehan, center, of Farmington and Darryl Lemay of Naples work out at Snap Fitness in Farmington on Monday.

Gyms

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were trying the no-frill gyms like Knockout,” she said.

Knockout Fitness, located in the relatively small, 3,000-square-foot space formerly occupied by Flex Gym & Aerobics Center on Culver Road in Rochester, has a no-frills size and a feisty mentality.

Its brochure and website mention recessionary

pressure on family finances and say its club is functional and affordable — actually, the term used is “ultra-affordable.”

“It’s 9.99 a month or \$39 for three months,” Knockout’s Zack Odo said. “There are trainers but no classes, no pool, no juice bar. There is a tanning facility.” He said the new club is doing well, bringing in the old Flex members and some new ones.

Snap Fitness, which has clubs in Farmington, Ontario County, and Scotts-

ville, is something of a speeding comet in the fitness galaxy. Launched in 2004, Snap now has franchises in 44 states and has more than 2,200 facilities worldwide.

The key? Low overhead, low fees, month-to-month contracts and a 24/7 operation to which every member can gain access with a pass card. The operation itself has lot of treadmills and elliptical trainers and a well-equipped weight room. But the extras have been

shaved off like so many unwanted pounds.

Fred Burghardt owns both the Snap clubs locally. He said the clubs have a personal, community feel that the bigger clubs can’t match.

“Not only are we open 24 hours, but people can come and go as they wish with the card,” he said. The clubs do have staff hours, he said, but they are minimal compared with the chain clubs that have dominated the scene for so long.

“What we offer is convenience to people who work out but don’t want to drive really far,” he said. “Most of our members live within a three-mile radius.”

Price remains a clear point of difference among local clubs, and Snap and Knockout are picking up on a theme of low-cost, hassle-free mentality that helped Planet Fitness grow in the Rochester region — five locations — and upstate.

Planet Fitness has frills such as massage chairs, pizza nights, that sort of thing, but it does regular battle with the big clubs on price. A current plan offers some frills and no startup fee for \$20 a month, well under the big

clubs.

But, World Gym’s Williams said, her club gains back the no-frills crowd once those who departed for price or convenience realize they’re not getting the results they wanted from their workout.

“It’s one thing to be cheap, but we have these services to help our members get the most out of their workout and to achieve their goals,” she said.

“People who join clubs will stop going if they keep doing the same thing over and over and not get anywhere with respect to fitness.

“We might lose them in the beginning but we get them back,” she said. □

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