



How to take your community fitness center from vacant to vibrant

Thanks for downloading this ebook outlining strategies for taking your community fitness center from vacant to vibrant. From the **wellness consulting** and **fitness management** work we've done with our clients over the last several years, we've seen our share of essentially empty fitness centers and pools in senior living communities. It's sad, really. So many times, these amenities are missed opportunities to do better for the residents.

What makes the vacant spaces even harder to justify is that community leadership has often invested substantial capital dollars for dedicated fitness spaces, including rooms that hold the exercise equipment, rooms devoted to group exercise classes, and additional (and typically significant) spaces for aquatics amenities. The result after construction is that the spaces are beautiful—even stunning.

But these same swanky spaces, unfortunately, often aren't functional. Sometimes they contain the wrong equipment or a dysfunctional design. Most commonly, the biggest roadblock to a thriving fitness program is that these spaces weren't considered under any type of strategic plan, so programming of the space is largely ineffective and typically disconnected from the rest of the community.

The result is a beautiful new space that sits unused.

In this ebook, we'll cover the following three key areas you can use to transition from a vacant fitness center to a vibrant one:

- Making the most of your capital investment by extending your commitment
- Engaging your residents with quality exercise program leadership
- Training your marketing and sales team to sell what the fitness program truly offers to residents



Emily Davenport

Director, Fitness Management

edavenport@nifs.org | 317-274-3432 x208

1: Making the most of your capital investment by extending your commitment

It's a big deal: You spent a *lot* of time with your developers on crafting a new space (or overhauling an existing one) that will match your community's appearance, and that you hope will be a welcome addition (or change) for your residents. It's not cheap, either, but you've done your due diligence, secured the funds, and designed the heck out of the space(s).

The capital investment may be so substantial that it feels like enough.

Alas, your time and your upfront financial investment are, in fact, not enough. There are important details to consider regarding the design of the space—details that can make or break the overall function of the amenities. Read our blog on [key things to avoid when you're building a fitness center in senior living](#) to find out more about common pitfalls when designing a new fitness space for senior living.

But you can't stop with the physical space. This isn't an "if you build it, they will come" type of project. You will need to cultivate a strategic plan for effective use of the space after it's open for use.

Maybe that strategy is the job of the activities director.

Or maybe the community needs a whole new approach to resident wellness that puts a wellness director at the top of the activities food chain. *We've said it before*, but it bears repeating: Wellness is a way of life, not an activity, and it should be cultivated accordingly. Do the activities drive the wellness program in your community, or does the wellness culture dictate the activities? Answering that question according to the organization you are striving to be will help you figure out an answer to the hierarchy question.

Regardless of who is in charge of it, the *strategy* for effective use of the fitness center is really central to ensuring that this new space contributes positively to residents' vitality. Questions for cultivating the strategy should include the following:

- What is the goal, mission statement, or focus of wellness in the community, and in what ways do you expect that your fitness program will contribute to that end?
- What investment needs to be made in staffing for the fitness center? (The answer to this question varies by community, but we can just about guarantee you that fee-based personal trainers and group fitness instructors are not enough.)
- How will you know you're achieving success in your programs? Will you mark it with simple participation goals, or will you be reviewing health outcomes, satisfaction, or other data points in your programming?



- If you're changing your activities/wellness hierarchy, how will you communicate those changes to the community and how will you reinforce your emphasis on this culture shift? Will that information need to be communicated to the residents? If so, how will you do that?
- What operating decisions need to be scrutinized in light of your new emphasis on resident wellness? Does it make sense for your organization to make this strategic shift by including wellness for your employees at the same time?

To be sure, these questions, when thoughtfully addressed, will likely lead to more questions. Be patient; cultivating a strategy takes time and often requires continuous tweaking. It is a journey well worth taking, both **for the benefit of your business** and for fulfilling your commitment to facilitate a vibrant lifestyle for your residents.

You may be wondering how we made the leap from keeping your fitness center hopping with activity to overall wellness culture at the community. In all fairness, we need to declare quite clearly and loudly that your fitness program IS NOT your wellness program. And your wellness programming IS NOT your wellness culture. If, however, your community is culturally focused on supporting residents' goals to live well at your community, part of that picture *may* include being physically active. (And we believe that will be increasingly important with incoming generations of prospects.) Where that fits for a resident, you need to make sure you have the right tools (people, places, programs) in place to assist those individuals.



2: Engaging your residents with quality exercise program leadership

There has been a *lot* of movement in recent years for senior living communities to include expansive, thoughtfully designed fitness spaces in their new community development or refurbishment plans. **Surveys have indicated** that wellness is a priority for prospects, and we don't really see that going away as the boomers look toward their next life and how they want to live that next chapter.

While there are some clear ideas about what constitutes good physical space, there is, based on our experience with clients, some ambiguity about how to really define quality exercise leadership.

What Quality Fitness Leadership Is Not

Let's start with a list of exclusion—a list of what good fitness program leadership is not. It is not limited to a traditional 1990s model of group fitness classes and a very part-time, questionably qualified attendant. It is not a personal trainer service (fee-based or free). It is not a silo-style environment where fitness is an island operating independently of what's happening with activities, or resident services, or dining, or other continuums of the community.

If any of that sounds familiar, I have a bad news/good news message for you.

- **Bad news:** You're stuck in a decades-old model. It may be working for you, but it's worth asking whether it's truly delivering on your brand promise. Consider that if you're working within a dated model, you may be lacking the capacity to truly be forward thinking in your exercise program.
- **Good news:** You have fantastic opportunities to do more for your residents in this area of your community.



Quality Fitness Leadership Includes Core Hard and Soft Skills

Quality fitness leadership for your residents isn't rocket science, but it does require some core skills that are learned through an accredited university curriculum, as well as soft skills that articulate a true passion for serving the residents in your community.

No doubt, you have more than enough practice at ferreting out the soft skills piece; after all, finding people who want to make a career out of serving our elders *is* your business. But understanding the technical competencies required in a qualified fitness center manager for your senior living community may be a little trickier. And then once you've found that qualified individual, you need to be prepared to take a strategic approach to on-boarding them in your community, which includes preparing both existing staff and residents for the new personnel.

The Keys to Hiring the Right Fitness Center Manager

There are a few keys about hiring that we think are helpful to communities venturing out in this process on their own. We've listed them quite briefly here:

- Make sure you get familiar with the candidate's credentials. Carefully evaluate certifications they list; not all fitness certifications are created (or earned) equally.
- Require the candidate to demonstrate the skills required for the job. If you need them to teach group exercise classes for your residents, have the candidate provide a demo. If you need someone who can administer a senior

fitness test, talk through that testing with the candidate or host a mock test as part of the interview.

- Ensure that the candidate can program for your audience. Evaluate their capacity to create print materials that fit with your brand, as well as whether they have the skills to execute a program from start to finish.

3: Training your marketing and sales team to sell what the fitness program truly offers to residents

Once you nail the strategy and the staffing for your program, it only makes sense to make sure your marketing team can communicate your updated and comprehensive services to prospective residents.

Promoting Senior Lifestyle Benefits in Marketing Collateral

How does your community talk about wellness to prospects? How do you promote resident lifestyle in your collateral? If you haven't given much thought to this, it's definitely time to start. You'd have to be under a pretty big rock to have missed the continued rise to prominence that wellness is making in senior living.

And because of that elevated importance, breezing through or ignoring your resident wellness amenities and services is no longer an option. Skipping over wellness in your collateral and marketing events is a huge mistake.



Promoting the Senior Wellness Program Effectively During Facility Tours

When we consult with communities, it's really (frighteningly) common to talk with the marketing and sales staff and learn that they're offering something like this during a tour:

“Now we're walking past our pool and coming up next will be our exercise room. We have personal trainers and a lot of different types of group fitness classes available for you to try all week long.”

It's like running through a checklist of “stuff” you're throwing at a prospect. Dining, check. Exercise, check. Crafts, check. No stories, nothing a prospect can sink her teeth into and really consider how her life would be if she had access to those opportunities. Typically, when the tour sounds like that, there is also a lack of marketing collateral about wellness, and there generally aren't events for prospects that communicate how your community helps residents live well.

Sometimes the glossing over is because of a lack of confidence about the community's amenities or services. Here's the thing: you *do not* have to offer jaw-droppingly beautiful amenities in order to execute on a message of well-living at your community. But you do need to have solid services with the right staff people behind that programming in order to market the lifestyle at your community effectively.

The **right people plus the right program** gets you the right stories you need to help prospects relate to what it will be like to live in your community. And that's what you ultimately want, right? Happy residents are the ones who feel connected, who engage in more living, and who contribute to their own lives and the lives of those around them through the opportunities you offer. If you're looking for a place to start on more effective communication and marketing opportunities around resident wellness, look no further than some simple numbers.

Data Matters, and Don't Let Anyone Tell You Differently

There are a number of areas in your wellness program where you can gather data, and we're big advocates for data because it's crucial to determining success as well as to telling the story about what fitness programming is at a community. You can make a big impact in marketing messaging simply by spotlighting how many residents participate in your fitness programming. But you can't capitalize on that number or message if you don't actually have the data.

Consider a resident story that might look something like this:

“At ABC Community, our residents believe that moving your body is one of many ways to live well. In fact, they’re such big believers that 83% of them participate in our fitness programs on a regular basis. When Mrs. Jones moved here in 2007, she wasn’t much for exercise. In fact, she’d never been to a class, or walked on a treadmill. But after she met with our fitness manager and had her personalized program created, she started moving and hasn’t stopped.”



My hunch is that the pretend story outlined above would resonate with a lot of prospects who have never exercised, are a little afraid of it, and are entirely unsure how to get started. Unless you have a story to which the prospect can relate, the sales staff mentions “fitness center” and “trainer,” and the prospect automatically writes that off as a nice perk but one she’ll never use.

And just like that, you’ve missed a chance to help the prospect see how living at your senior living community is not only different (she already knows that and it’s part of what is keeping her away!), but actually *better* than where she’s living now. Mrs. Jones—the resident in the testimonial—sounds like that prospect, probably looks like her, and she’s been able to live exceptionally well since she moved into your community. It’s compelling and reassuring, and it’s all backed by a strategy that captures the data and the stories for use at the right times.

Now, **getting that data** and those stories is not high math, but it does require that you have the right personnel behind the programming to facilitate a more strategic approach to resident lifestyle. (Sound familiar? If not, reread #2 above.)



Congratulations on getting through the ebook! If you're embarking on creating a new fitness center or striving to offer a better fitness program to your residents, I hope the information in this piece was a helpful starting point. Contact me by email or at 317-274-3432 if you have additional questions or want to discuss how NIFS consulting or fitness center management could benefit your organization.

EMILY DAVENPORT
DIRECTOR, FITNESS MANAGEMENT
317-274-3432
EDAVENPORT@NIFS.ORG

National Institute for Fitness and Sport
250 University Blvd. Indianapolis, IN 46202
wellness.nifs.org

CONTACT US

