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Retailer/trainer Greenspan thrives with blended approach

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A self described "rebel and iconoclast," Jerry Greenspan, founder and owner of Columbus Fitness Consultants and Exercise Equipment Experts in Ohio, has created an uncommon bastion with his combination of personal training studios and retail stores. As his company approaches its 10 year anniversary, SNEWS shares the story of someone we find to be among the industry's most educated, dedicated, enthusiastic and opinionated.

Not just business as usual

With two locations, personal training studio Columbus Fitness Consultants and specialty fitness dealer Exercise Equipment Experts are housed together. Although this combination makes tremendous sense, for some reason it hasn't been replicated much. In fact, Greenspan only knows of one other similar North American operator in Philadelphia who runs a training studio and equipment showroom together, but that operation is distinct because he sells memberships and supplements as well. SNEWS knows of another somewhat similar business in the United Kingdom called Lifestyle run by another dedicated and opinionated industry longtimer, Arthur Torr (see our story from Nov. 22, 2002).

"When I started my company in 1994 with a friend who had a Ph.D. and RD in nutrition, I wanted every aspect of fitness and nutrition covered," Greenspan, who holds multiple degrees himself in biomechanical engineering, physical therapy and nutrition, told SNEWS. "We wanted to sell fitness first and have people work with knowledgeable professionals – and then sell equipment secondarily. It just seemed intelligent to follow that approach."

What Greenspan was determined to avoid was the "musclehead" style common in some specialty retail shops focused solely on selling steel and iron to fulfill numbers and meet quotas.

"A lot of people who purchase equipment think that the machine, by itself, will make them fit," said Greenspan. "They don't realize that the equipment is just a tool, and if they aren't knowledgeable about using it, they may end up doing more damage than if they did nothing at all."

And expertise – or knowledge and credibility – are what Greenspan has based his business on, comparing his company to other specialty retail shops as more like "an optometrist to an eyeglass salesman."

Extreme education

Greenspan, with 17 years of education (after high school, mind you) and just about as many initials after his name, definitely isn't just all talk. While he believes human nature tends to take the path of least resistance, he determinedly plowed his way through school to take home five (count 'em, five) degrees. And we're not just talking about general liberal arts or philosophy.

Get this – Greenspan has three undergraduate degrees: premedical sciences and biomechanical engineering from University of South Florida, Tampa (both summa cum laude, nonetheless); and physical therapy from The Ohio State University; as well as two graduate degrees from The Ohio State University; a masters of science in biomechanical engineering specializing in exercise biomechanics and a masters of science in human nutrition. He will also occasionally admit to being a tad obsessive about his education.

"I really didn't like school," Greenspan insisted (and we're supposed to believe that?), claiming that he never planned on a physical therapy program. "But when I opened my business, a lot of customers had orthopedic problems, and I realized I didn't know enough about these. If I wanted to be legitimate, I had to have the rehab aspect as well."

Originally aspiring to be a medical doctor, the Titusville, Fla., native was a frequently injured athlete who studied under sports fitness expert Bob Gajda, who recommended that he instead focus on biomechanics.

"I found that I really wanted to prevent injuries and medical problems as opposed to focusing mainly on treatment and rehabilitation as medicine does," Greenspan said. "I might have been a bit ahead of my time, but I thought I would be in huge demand since there would be no one else like me."

And we still haven't found anyone quite like Greenspan, a person who at times comes off somewhat arrogant, other times maddeningly dogmatic, and in other moments, unexpectedly and delightfully self deprecating. "With multiple degrees, you realize what you don't know," he told SNEWS. There are a lot of brilliant people out there, and I'm not one of them."

But he was smart enough to take to heart his father's advice – "Do it right or don't do it at all" – by establishing a self-financed business with zero debt and in the black every year in an extremely competitive market. Greenspan shies away from talking dollars, saying that he doesn't define success according to money, unlike most people, he adds. Instead, success is that he enjoys every day of work, and that he has the tools and the knowledge to help people look and feel great.

"I have had the incredible opportunity to study all the disciplines that I desired," said Greenspan, "and I am confident, intimidated by no customer and can hold my own with any professional. Plus, I tend to push pretty hard until I get what I want." Nobody argues with him on that one. No one enjoys a good debate or taking on what he perceives as a wrong as much as Greenspan does. That can be a joy or terribly aggravating, depending on your own personality or opinions.

Distinguishing characteristics

With his high standards and his unyielding commitment to credibility, Greenspan understandably is extremely picky and quite rigorous when hiring staff, which today numbers 20. For one retail position alone, he recently interviewed 55 candidates over three months, and the final candidates ultimately underwent three interviews and a personality profile exam.

On the training front, potential employees must have “great personality skills,” he said, and a degree in exercise science or personal training. Once hired, they are put through an intense eightweek internship, including a comprehensive training of how Greenspan wants all exercises performed, a full review of anatomy and physiology, and multiple oral and written exams. Then they initially are given specific programs to conduct with clients, which essentially allows for minimal modifications and limited autonomy.

We’re obviously not just looking for warm bodies, and we see our training as quality control, Greenspan said. For the record, he dismisses certifications, claiming that they can’t compare to academic degrees and calling these daylong courses “a farce for connoting competence” while really providing only a little knowledge, which, he said, is dangerous.

There isn’t much crossover between trainers at Columbus Fitness Consultants and retail folks at Exercise Equipment Experts, mainly due to conflicts trying to schedule appointments and also be available in the showroom for walk-in customers, as well as because Greenspan believes that most clinicians are not good at asking for the sale.

And while Greenspan admitted that the company’s long-term gross profits are significantly greater from equipment sales than personal training, he said that he is wholeheartedly committed to training because “that’s who we are; it’s an aspect that we want to cover as medical professionals.”

It’s no surprise that Greenspan is equally as choosy about equipment his stores carry, which must meet his stringent biomechanical and engineering standards, offer great value and be backed by excellent service. Currently on the floor as key suppliers at Exercise Equipment Experts are Bodyguard, Theradyne, Star Trac and SportsArt treadmills, Diamondback, SportsArt and Kettler elliptical trainers, and strength pieces from Northern Lights, Tuff Stuff, Hampton and Pro Bell, among a few other items.

“We’re looking to sell people the right product, not just any product, to get them to their goals,” Greenspan said, “and we don’t worry about quotas. Our philosophy is integrity first and money second. We want to be the best, not the biggest.”

According to Doug Tietz, national sales manager for Theradyne, Greenspan is one of his only exclusive dealers and indeed considered one of the company’s best. “I would rather have 50 Jerry Greenspans than one entity with 50 stores,” Tietz told SNEWS. “He is extremely intelligent and educates his clientele, and he is a very good salesperson and businessman.”

Viewing the business and himself

When it comes to promoting the business, Greenspan conceded, “I don’t know jack about marketing,” and chooses to rely on focused measures such as good locations and signage to attract driveby business, huge yellow page ads, a website and mostly referrals and word of mouth.

Ultimately, what differentiates Exercise Equipment Experts and Columbus Fitness Consultants from other specialty fitness retailers are the staff’s academic degrees and the company’s reputation, Greenspan said, which together confer knowledge and credibility. The walls in his stores are plastered with more than 30 educational degrees and articles written by Greenspan and his staff – a distinguishing feature that isn’t evident at many other specialty fitness retailers.

Despite his team’s impressive qualifications and experience, Greenspan admits that some customers automatically perceive the retail side as just slick salespeople. “I honestly thought more people would respect our credentials upfront, but they still want a second opinion. I’m always amazed when people don’t buy from us; it’s just not logical.”

But manufacturers definitely notice the difference Greenspan and his team bring to the industry.

“What’s frustrating is that every retailer is talking about making sure people get what they need, but nobody is really doing it,” said Jhan Dolphin, former U.S. director of operations for Northern Lights. “Jerry is refreshing because he is dedicated to helping people get results, and his people are truly trainers before salespeople. I would clone him in a heartbeat.”

Although you might think a guy like Greenspan would want all specialty fitness retailers to operate his way, he surprisingly said he doesn’t.

“I don’t think we have a better way of doing business; I just approach the business from a slightly different perspective,” Greenspan said. “We have a niche market, and ours might not be right for everybody. People should run their business the way that they think is right.”

As for the future, Greenspan admitted only to being a good adapter who will adjust as necessary to the environment at the time – a principle he attributes to learning in martial arts. One thing won’t change – what he calls his mantra: “It is more important to know what you don’t know than what you do know.”

Ultimately in his self-assessment, he is characteristically frank. “Hey, I had 17 years of school and then was an entrepreneur on top of it; nobody is that stupid,” Greenspan joked. “I’m just overeducated and underemployed.”

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