

Rethinking Retail: Columbus Fitness takes on web equipment reviewers single-handedly

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Every retailer knows the routine: A customer wanders in clutching the latest Consumer Reports, Treadmill Doctor print-out, or a page from some other unknown web review, points and says, “I want that.”

Everybody recognizes some version of the above. Everybody can relate to the groan felt inside. Everybody searches for just the right schpiel for such a person. And every retailer we know tries hard to handle it diplomatically, knowing many of the reviews online and in consumer magazines are flawed in some way, perhaps slanted or biased, don't include all brands, and sometimes are even completely inaccurate.

Jerry Greenspan, owner of training studio Columbus Fitness Consultants and retailer Exercise Equipment Experts in Columbus, Ohio, decided this year to tackle the issue head-on.

Greenspan put an ad in the city's regional magazine, in the local papers and on his website advertising a free piece of equipment to anybody who could find a reviewer who had more know-how and integrity than he does:

“If you can find any other fitness equipment reviewer or retailer who can match our expertise, reputation and honesty & integrity, you can have any product that we offer free

of charge. That's right, our best treadmill, elliptical, bike or home gym will be yours free of charge.”

“We all get tired of all the Treadmill Doctor, Treadmill Sensei, Consumer Reports, Fitness Professor, whatever, that we put an ad in some magazines,” he explained to SNEWS®. “I just got tired of people getting information on the web and believing these people are experts.”

Cocky, yes, perhaps, and Greenspan even admits it. But he does have the credentials—more than most—to back up the offer, although others could learn from his frontal attack strategy. Greenspan has graduate degrees in biomechanical engineering, physical therapy and human nutrition; undergraduate degrees in engineering and pre-medical science; has worked as an engineer, and for five years did biomechanical engineering research in Ohio State University's Gait Analysis and Biodynamics laboratories. And he's been an equipment retailer, service provider and trainer for 15 years. Even his employees have to have degrees and must complete a residency with him and pass written tests.

The problem most retailers find, whatever credentials or experience they have, is that they don't want to argue with potential customers, Greenspan said. So he decided this year to just put his money where his mouth is.

“There are a lot of retailers out there like me who are so fed up. Some of these people are so arrogant,” he said of the reviewers. “We're not going to fight with an argument.”

One guideline that has helped in some cases is the new Federal Trade Commission rule as of late 2009 that requires bloggers,





reviewers and others who perform what the FTC calls “word-of-mouth marketing” to clearly state they earn money from what they review.

But new FTC guidelines are just the start. Retailers like Greenspan still find consumers believing everything they read. So he explains it further on his website:

“It is difficult to trust anyone in today’s world, so many people attempt to research fitness equipment through various internet sites and/or consumer magazines. Most of these reviews can be viewed by you free of charge.

“So how does the reviewer make money? You really believe that these individuals evaluate 600 treadmills, 600 ellipticals and 300 bikes and 100 gyms and write reviews for all of them for no money? That’s a pretty lousy business model, wouldn’t you agree? And some magazines review everything from toasters to fitness equipment to automobiles. Doctors, lawyers and other professionals specialize, so how is it possible for these

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>> Point out that specializing is key for any business, from doctor to equipment retailer. That means focusing on one product segment and knowing it inside and out, rather than spreading yourself from adding machines to zebras.

>> As his website notes, which we excerpted above, explain that nothing is free in this life—not even opinions—and the reviewers have to make money somehow.

>> Make sure the consumer knows to look for and finds a clear disclosure, as now required by the federal government’s FTC.

“I thought people would like to hear

publications to be experts in everything?”

Greenspan offers a few tips to other retailers who fight the constant battle:

>> Help people realize that no reviewer could have possibly used 100s or even 1,000s of pieces of equipment for the reviews offered. “It would take years,” he said.

about somebody taking these reviewers on,” Greenspan told us. “People just get so frustrated.”

Nobody has asked for the free equipment ... yet.

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