THE DEBATE

ONLINE TRAINING

Noel Lyons MSc
Fitness business and exercise coach
www.personaltrainers-online.co.uk

What once largely involved pre-packaged workout programmes sold by fitness websites, online fitness training (OFT) is evolving into more personalised advice and regular feedback from some of the biggest names in the fitness world. But can the benefits of OFT make up for the loss of face-to-face interaction and safe, effective exercise with an expert? Clearly no, but it could prove a useful addition. While limited, the research on eCoaching is encouraging:

- Participants who were given a structured behavioural treatment programme with weekly contact and individualised feedback had better weight loss compared with those just given links to educational websites.1
- Adding email counselling to a basic internet weight loss intervention programme significantly improved weight loss in adults at risk of diabetes.2

Without sufficient research, we are left to judge for ourselves how well OFT is being applied in the field. Already 8% of the 75,000 personal trainers in the USA are now coaching clients online.3

There are so many reasons why online training is worthwhile. Firstly, there is a trend towards shorter workouts (<30min) and home-based activities. This is not helpful when you charge by the hour and expect people to come to you. By matching these people’s wants with OFT, you expand your reach.

Online training means there is no need to juggle between the availability of the trainer and client as the internet gives you limitless reach. Not only that but it’s ideal for clients who can’t train with you as much as they would like or can afford. Extra sessions mean better results and more accountability for their lifestyle.

Having a legitimate, thriving and professional website says far more about you than paying to have the same old ad in the phonebook or local paper! OFT services can serve as a “non-sales” way for clients to learn more about you. They qualify your prospects as being interested in what you offer and allowing them to experience “a taster”.

With the huge array of fitness certifications available today, how you display your “professionalism” is going to become crucial. Consumers are becoming more educated on what constitutes a go-to fitness expert, by witnessing “in-demand” professionals at work. Besides, if you don’t, others will!

Online training sets you up for exponential business growth. In an on-demand world, you need more options in your playbook to compete. Consumers are increasingly expecting a more comprehensive set of services than just group or personal training. What started out as online exercises now incorporates other technology-based tools. You can create music and motivational content to be played on MP3 players while clients exercise. Podcasts and webinars can stimulate client relationships and community between like-minded exercisers. Phone coaches inspire groups. Your own membership site places you as a leader of a niche interest.

Most certifying organisations do a fine job of teaching technical proficiency, but the majority of fitness professionals are struggling to get clients or lead a normal balanced life. Yet those who have the ability to apply their expertise in a timely and varied fashion, to as many people as possible, will inevitably become the most sought after. This is why I believe that fitness professionals who adopt OFT strategies into their business model will soon leave the traditionalists way behind.

References
1. Deborah F Tate et al, Using Internet Technology to Deliver a Behavioural Weight Loss Program, JAMA, Mar 2001; 285: 1172-1177.
2. Deborah F Tate et al; Effects of Internet Behavioral Counseling on Weight Loss in Adults at Risk for Type 2 Diabetes: A Randomized Trial, JAMA, Apr 2003; 289: 1833-1836.

The topic for the next debate will be supplements vs a healthy diet.
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ONE-TO-ONE TRAINING VS ONLINE TRAINING
Going head-to-head in the debate forum are Noel Lyons and Mark Sullivan

The theory of online training is great – it saves time travelling to and from clients and programmes are already set. But is it that great in practice?

In my experience, one-on-one training will always come out on top. The obvious reason being that of technique. If you can’t see your client then how do you know they are doing the exercise right? Without being shown good technique and being corrected when they do it wrong, they will at least be exercising the wrong bits and at worst could be risking an injury. Exercise DVDs that come out every January taught by celebrities, are another tool used by the public whereby technique cannot be corrected. This is such an important aspect of fitness training.

But let’s look at some other reasons. How does the trainer know the person is actually doing the session? I heard a very funny story about someone downloading HRM data to a trainer who got worried about the heart rates they could read. Then the client admitted they hadn’t actually done the session, they had just put the HRM on their dog and taken it out for a walk! At least with the one-on-one, you know they are doing it because you can see them.

This also links well to the next point and that is motivation. Clients can be good at making excuses to get out of a session, so we must be there to motivate them. Motivation is key:

“To enhance motivation, you must analyse and respond not only to a player’s personality but also to the interaction of personal and situational characteristics. Because motivations may change over time, you should continue to monitor people’s motives for participation even months after they’ve begun.”

Then there is the fact that programmes need to be designed for the individual. We have all had the situation where a client has come in and we realise within five minutes that the planned session needs to be made harder or easier. How can an online trainer make that instant personal judgement? Guess what, they can’t. I spoke to a lady this week who has just paid £90 for a year with an online running coach. After one month she already thinks it is wasted as she feels it is not really geared specifically for her. She can’t get the instant feedback she would get from a coach who was there at the session. She did a session because it was on the programme but knew she was too tired and therefore the session went badly and she felt more unhappy. Far better to have the coach there who can see that and react to it accordingly.

Lastly and probably most importantly in this industry – I started work as a personal fitness trainer because I actually like working with people. Scarily, most of us are, I believe, in the same boat. Well, if we like people that much, why are we trying to avoid working directly with them by going online? That is surely for trainers who have little or no interpersonal skills and prefer looking at a computer screen than a face, even if it is sweating a bit after working out. But seeing first hand when we make a difference to our clients’ lives and health is one of the best parts of the job for many people.

So if you like people and want to get some real results that you can see and that you can directly influence then stay as you are and enjoy people.

Reference