Leveraging Nutrition Expertise at Your Health Club

Part of the IHRSA Best Practice E-book Series
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The Intersection Between Health Clubs, Physical Activity, and Nutrition

Numerous studies have been conducted on the relationship between nutrition and physical activity, and how each one plays an important role in establishing and maintaining health.

You know that your members could spend all day working out in your club, but if they’re not fueling themselves properly, they won’t get the results they’re working so hard to achieve.

This is where the intersection between physical activity, health clubs, and nutrition occurs. In response to an always evolving industry and customer base, clubs are expanding their programming options to remain competitive, access new revenue streams, and tap into a new market of customers who are interested in a more holistic approach to wellness. Many clubs are hiring nutritionists to speak with members about opportunities to pair their individual fitness routines with a healthy diet that will help them achieve their goals.

Sounds interesting, right? You’re probably wondering how you can start a nutrition program of your own, and whether your club has the appropriate resources to do exactly that. If so, you’ve come to the right place! The information contained in this e-book will help you decide whether hiring a nutrition expert makes sense for your business and your members.

Let’s get started by answering some of your questions.
Chapter One

How Would My Club Benefit from Hiring a Nutrition Expert?
How Would My Club Benefit from Hiring a Nutrition Expert?

We’ve already mentioned some of the upsides, but there is a short list of some of the most important reasons why hiring a nutrition expert could be a beneficial move for your business and your members.

*It creates more opportunities to be profitable.*

Each new program offering creates an additional opportunity to access new revenue streams. This same principle can be applied when you begin offering nutrition services at your club, and these offerings can build a sense of community and help members achieve their goals, leading to improved member retention and satisfaction.

*It creates more opportunities to improve the member experience.*

Most clubs can agree that they are constantly searching for exceptional staff members and program offerings to support their clients’ goals. Health club usage and retention are often used as measures of success, and providing nutrition services is a great way for a club to ensure that its members are able to attack their wellness goals from multiple angles.

Two different U.S. clubs—VIDA Fitness in Washington, D.C. and the Mount Auburn Club in Watertown, MA—learned how to improve the member ex-
experience by...you guessed it...observing members. They came to the conclu-

sion that members were working out but not seeing results because their diets were not supporting their activity efforts.

To solve this problem, both facilities decided to create nutrition programs that, when combined with physical activity, provided members with additional strategies for maximizing their results.

My SportLady: Fitness Fur Frauen in Munich, Germany, took a similar approach to addressing the needs of their members. As a response to various requests for information on preparing healthy foods, the company introduced a cooking school and made nutrition offerings available at every location.
It creates increased opportunities for collaboration.

Hiring a nutrition expert—full time, part time, or as a consultant—means bringing a qualified healthcare provider into your club, which opens doors for many collaborative opportunities.

Since some professional services are covered under many health plans, there is a chance that nutritional services could be eligible for insurance reimbursement. In addition, having a healthcare professional on staff also opens the door for partnership opportunities with other health providers like physicians, and lends added credibility to the club in the healthcare space.

The Longfellow Clubs in Natick and Wayland, MA, have been at the forefront of this type of collaboration since 1994 when they opened their Longfellow Health Center. The health center is a multi-practice facility, offering nutrition in addition to physical therapy, acupuncture, and more.
Chapter Two

How Do I Find (and Hire) the Right Professional?
How Do I Find (and Hire) the Right Professional?

We interviewed a number of health club dietitians for this e-book, and all of them emphasized the importance of having the necessary skills to practice in a club environment. Many of the skills they mentioned are currently taught as part of a traditional nutrition curriculum (resulting in a four-year undergraduate degree or two-year masters degree with supervised practice internship), but some are given less focus than others. Here is a list of the skills that these professionals felt every dietitian should possess:

- **Clinical knowledge** – the nutrition professional should have an understanding of clinical nutrition, including diabetes management, heart disease, metabolic disorders, and food-drug interactions.

- **Nutrition counseling** – the professional should have a good grasp on counseling for behavior modification.

- **Marketing and business background** – it might be helpful to consider hiring a professional with business and/or marketing experience. In the health club setting, “selling yourself” is often a necessary skill that helps to build a client base and convince members of value.

- **Entrepreneurism** – a dietitian in a health club setting is often responsible for cultivating his or her own client base, so it can be helpful to hire someone who thinks outside the box and is willing to experiment with new ideas and programming options. Hiring a nutrition professional who is able to effectively sell his or her services will also generate more revenue for your club.
Chapter Three

How Do I Build a Successful Nutrition Program?

Photo by VIDA Fitness
How Do I Build a Successful Nutrition Program?

There are many ways to define success, so to give you an idea of what effective nutrition programming could look like, here are some examples of health clubs that have grown their nutrition offerings and experienced positive results based on the goals they were looking to achieve.

Embedding Nutrition Services Into Existing and New Club Programs

The Mount Auburn Club in Watertown, MA, employs a full time registered dietitian (R.D.) on staff. The club originally hired Jennifer Jasmin R.D., L.D.N., on a part time basis to teach the “Genevix 90 Day Commit to Get Fit” program, but soon realized that nutrition services could become a fully integrated part of other program and service offerings. The club saw the need for someone to advise the café staff about healthy food offerings, and also wanted to advance the opportunity to offer private counseling and incorporate nutrition into other group programs.

For the Mount Auburn Club, hiring a dietitian generated private counseling business and added value to existing programs by weaving nutrition education into a variety of programs the club was already offering. Two great examples of this are the “What Women Want” program (a strength class for women) and the “Find Your Balance” program (a program geared toward improving balance and preventing falls).
In the “What Women Want” class, participants learn from the R.D. about protein and the importance of pre- and post-workout snacks. One of the balance program classes is now devoted to teaching participants about nutrients for bone health and improved neuromuscular function, like vitamin D and omega-3 fatty acids. The R.D. also developed new nutrition-based programs that target a variety of age groups and ability levels.

In the beginning, the club explored a number of models for private nutrition counseling and conducted a lot of preliminary market research—including what insurance providers other local dietitians accept and how much they charge for services. The club decided not to offer free counseling or include it with membership because they didn’t want to devalue the service in the community. The Mount Auburn Club took a healthcare-based approach to offering nutrition services and was successful in offering clinical quality nu-
trition counseling and integrating it with other fitness and wellness services. Most people bill their services through health insurance, but the club also offers packages for people who wish to pay privately.

**Mount Auburn Club Demographics**

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<th>Date opened: 1973</th>
<th>Club size (sq. ft.): 120,000, including tennis courts</th>
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<td>Membership: 3,500</td>
<td>Owner: William Crowley</td>
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**Private Counseling with Nutrition Professionals**

Hiring a dietitian or other professional to provide one-on-one nutrition counseling is a popular model for clubs, and many clubs that offer nutrition programs also make private counseling available. This model can be successful under a variety of hiring and compensation structures.

Two great examples of this model are the Weymouth Club in Weymouth, MA, and VIDA Fitness in Washington, D.C. At the Weymouth Club, the program started with Nutrition Director Kim Trudel, M.S., M.A., R.D., L.D.N., and has since expanded to include several additional part time dietitians.

New members to the Weymouth Club receive a physical assessment, including things like body fat measurement and fitness testing, two personal training sessions, and a free 30-minute consultation with a dietitian. The free consultation is an opportunity for dietitians to provide some basic nutrition information, explain how time spent with a dietitian can benefit the client, and talk about health insurance options.

Nutrition directors and dietitians can be compensated using different models. Health clubs can use one or multiple modes of compensation including salary, commission, bonus structure, and incentives to meet particular
financial goals. For example, dietitians at the Weymouth Club have multiple roles, and currently one of the dietitians on staff is also a personal trainer. Rates vary by service for individual counseling (Medical Nutrition Therapy), group classes, management time, and coaching time (clinical notes, billing, reviewing food diaries, and corresponding with clients).

When asked for her advice to clubs considering starting a nutrition program, Kim said, “Jump on the ball and start now! Hire a registered dietitian and hire the RIGHT dietitian that fits the mold—someone who understands the fitness and the nutrition side. The nutrition department would not be successful without the other various departments within a health club. Fitness, tennis, and aquatic departments all share a symbiotic relationship focused on what is in the best interest of the clients and can be a constant referral system.”

“Give it time—it will develop. It won’t turn around in a few months—you’ll need to give it a solid year to grow, as it takes time to contract with insurance companies and grow a consistent client base. But these programs add value to members’ experiences. We also have physical therapy here too—members will make nutrition and therapy appointments around workouts and classes. It really adds value for the member.”
Another example is VIDA Fitness. The club implemented their new nutrition focus in two phases: first making sure everything offered at the fuel bar cafe was consistent with the club’s nutrition philosophy and second, hiring a registered dietitian to develop the private counseling model. There are currently four dietitians on staff.

Under the current model, the dietitians are paid a base salary, in addition to commission made on their sessions, similar to the payment model for personal trainers. All members are offered a complimentary 30-minute nutrition session, called “Nutrition Fit.” “Nutrition Fit” is an introduction to what nutrition counseling options look like and can do for each client.

Based on the initial sessions, members can select from a variety of nutrition packages depending on their needs and customized recommendations. During these individual sessions, clients work with a registered dietitian and receive a customized plan, medical nutrition therapy, meal planning assistance, behavior change counseling, and strategic planning to help achieve personal goals.

VIDA Fitness members participate in “Lunch & Learn.”
As with other clubs, VIDA dietitians are housed in the personal training department and attend weekly meetings with training staff. This relationship opens up a good referral pathway for the dietitians. Currently, VIDA dietitians are not accepting insurance but are working toward insurance reimbursement options for individual and group sessions.

When asked what advice they would offer a club looking to start a new nutrition program, Tara Sampson, general manager at VIDA Fitness’ U Street club said, “I’ve experienced bringing a dietitian on the team where it went well, and I’ve done it at another club and it didn’t go well. The lesson learned from the first experience was that staff and trainer buy-in is essential because you will have overlapping clients with trainers. Making sure you have a person and program that will complement what is already working for the company is the MOST important first step.”

The club’s dietitian Alayna Markwordt, M.S., R.D., L.D., added, “I agree. Management staff was great integrating me with staff and helping me get to know personal trainers and massage therapists and other staff and trainers. From a dietitian’s standpoint, you have to be really organized and ready to go. Know what your service is and how you’re going to sell and deliver that service. It’s a different environment than many dietitians are used to from school, internships, and traditional jobs, so having that established is really beneficial.”

**VIDA Club Demographics**

Date opened: 2006  
Club size (sq. ft.): 6 locations, 10,000 - 60,000  
Owner: David von Storch
Part Time or Consulting Nutrition Expert

Employing a nutrition expert part time or on a consulting basis to offer private counseling may be a good option for you if you are just starting your nutrition program or anticipate a smaller long-term demand for nutrition services. The Longfellow Club uses this model in the Longfellow Health Center, a holistic health center affiliated with the club. The multi-practice facility, which also includes physical therapy, chiropractic work, massage therapy, acupuncture, and herbal therapy, is located adjacent to the club, and each facility has its own separate entrance in addition to a doorway linking the two.

The Longfellow Health Center employed dietitians as consultants or independent contractors. Under this model, payment for visits (whether they are covered by insurance or not) are made to the health center, which then compensates the dietitians based on an agreed upon rate, typically a 50-50 or 40-60 split. With this setup, the health center handles financial and administrative duties and imposes no additional rent or hourly requirement from the dietitians. Each independent contractor is responsible for marketing their services and building their client base. According to Nutrition and Water Exercise Director Jane Polley M.S., R.D., L.D.N., this arrangement appeals most to people who prefer part time work.

Health or Lifestyle Programs Incorporating Nutrition Curricula

In addition to services provided at the health center, the Longfellow Club has offered a nutrition program since 1994. The club offers a lifestyle change program with an established, science-based nutrition curriculum. The program, “Habits for Health and Happiness,” recently partnered with Genavix’s “Commit To Get Fit” program.
This partnership has strengthened the program and taken it to a new level of success. It is facilitated with a registered dietitian. Participants meet twice a week for 12 weeks. Each weekly meeting consists of classroom nutrition for 90 minutes, followed by a structured exercise class for 30 minutes. In addition to the group meetings, the program also includes two private meetings with the dietitian and two fitness assessments.

The curriculum contains science-based education, including blood sugar, cholesterol, healthy and unhealthy fats, as well as a behavior modification component. Because the nutrition part of the program is reimbursed by insurance, it needs to have certain medical nutrition components and stick mostly to a nutrition curriculum. There are currently four times available for group meetings—two in the evening and two in the morning. The club is working on adding more specific groups (e.g. a diabetes group) in the future.

When asked what she would say to clubs looking to start a nutrition program, Jane Polley said, “Hiring an R.D. who is ready to become a healthcare provider is crucial for the business end of it. It is also important to get someone who has the capacity to have more than one role at the club, so they are more naturally integrated into the club culture and can more naturally connect with members. At the same time, scope of practice (staying within your area of expertise) is critical. As participants are introduced to fitness professionals and to group exercise instructors, it becomes a group effort to feel help them to feel at home when they are at the club. This is how our participants really succeed and feel comfortable. They get over hurdles of being at a club and then they tell their friends. Word of mouth is our best ad.”

Longfellow Club Demographics

Date opened: 1980
Membership: 3,500

Club size (sq. ft.): 90,000
Another example of incorporating nutrition curricula into a club environment is My SportLady: Fitness fur Frauen in Munich, Germany. My SportLady offers a cooking school, where members learn to prepare healthy, home-cooked meals. The club also offers several holistic nutrition programs, including:

- The Detox Program is run leading up to Easter, when many people are fasting. Members sign up for one week, during which healthy meals are delivered to them. These meals are usually the same meals made in the club’s cooking school and also incorporate special detox recipes. During the week, My SportLady has also begun offering specific workout classes with a “detox” focus, such as detox yoga.

- The Happiness Program is an 8-week program offering weekly meetings with a nutritionist who takes a holistic approach. The program focuses on nutrition and psychology, with the goal of creating a happier life.

When asked what other clubs could do to implement these programs in their clubs, Jasmin Kirstein, founder and CEO of My SportLady Fitness, said, “You could look at programs to buy—maybe they have different ones in the states. It is good to have someone in the club who is an employee, like a trainer, who has nutrition qualifications and integrate that into the club. Community outreach is very important—show that you are there, that you are in the community. We go to conventions and things like that where we introduce our programs, share our recipes, and promote our club. Sometimes fitness clubs have negative image—when they hear you have more to offer that might change.”

**My SportLady: Fitness Fur Frauen Demographics**

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<td>Membership: 1,900</td>
<td>Owner: Jasmin Kirstein</td>
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Chapter Four

Best Practices on How to Create the Best Program for Your Club
Best Practices on How to Create the Best Program for Your Club

There you have it—all the steps, tips, and tricks you need to ensure you are able to successfully implement and run a nutrition program in your club. Before we sign off, here are three final things to keep in mind as you are creating and launching the perfect program for your members:

1. Be patient.
   It takes time—and finessing—to fully incorporate a nutrition expert and his or her services into a health club and get him or her up to speed on the sales and marketing processes. It is also important to note that it takes a year or more to go through the process of providing insurance reimbursement for the expert.

2. Find the right fit for your club.
   Finding the right person is an important part of the process. Most of the clubs we spoke with emphasized the importance of bringing in someone with an entrepreneurial spirit, some background in or knowledge of business and marketing, and someone who buys into the club’s philosophies—nutrition and otherwise.
3. Make the nutritionist feel welcome.
Treat them the same way you treat your other staff members. Staff and trainer buy-in is essential. Nutrition programs work best when they complement the great services a club already offers. When staff—especially group exercise instructors, trainers, and tennis instructors—buy into the services that the nutritionist is providing, they will act as great referrals (and vice versa). Even if the professional is not a full time employee, it is crucial to ensure they can establish good relationships with all of your full time club staff.
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