



all the store's

BY DOUG SCHNITZSPAHN

» a » stage

Asbury Park, N.J.—forever immortalized in the songs of Bruce Springsteen—may seem like an odd place to find the future of the fitness industry ... or the future of anything for that matter. Ever since the late 1970s, all those things that had worked their way into The Boss' lyrics were long gone or had crumbled into disrepair—the crash-bang roller-derby casino and fun houses filled with shrieks, the tinkle of the carousel and thunk of the skeet ball machines, the addictive pink cotton candy and even the fortune-tellers draped in gold-threaded cloth. Once the jewel of the Jersey Shore, the boardwalk resort seemed beyond help. A city manager even dubbed it Sarajevo-by-the-Sea, recollecting the former jewel of a city torn and shredded by the Bosnian war in the 1990s.

But, if you want insight into how specialty fitness retail stores could look if they want to survive in the coming years, this seaside ghost town now regaining vitality is a good place to start.

Since 2002, the city has undergone massive reconstruction. In 2005, Asbury Park reopened its boardwalks and the town has been selling off land to redevelopers and contractors who are building trendy hotels and revitalizing the downtown with new, unique restaurants, shops and condos. In the midst of this urban renaissance sits Fitness Lifestyles, a 60,000-square-foot specialty retail megalith in what used to be J.J. Newberry's department store. The place is an experience right in step with the hip, artsy crowd the area is now attracting. Inside, it has all the buzz and energy of Asbury Park's old arcades. The top floor is a health club called Newberry's (reminiscent of the old department store), the bottom floor a showroom for used equipment, and the main floor is slowly morphing into a beach-town sporting goods and fitness emporium. As the town of Asbury Park experiences its revitalization, more and more customers are wandering into the old department store turned fitness arcade, and these window shoppers, descendants of the crowds who used

The specialty retailer of the future must *sell a lifestyle and create community* with a retail space that entertains.



► Fitness Lifestyles in Asbury, Park, N.J., now occupies what used to be J.J. Newberry's department store 50 years ago. It now merges a health club, a fitness equipment showroom and a sporting goods emporium.

to stroll Asbury's boardwalks, are the key to the success of Fitness Lifestyles and perhaps the entire industry.

BUILDING A BOND

"Most people are opening up specialty fitness retail stores on highways," said Leo Clark, owner of Fitness Lifestyles, who started in the industry servicing machines 24 years ago after he graduated from college. "That's tough. Foot traffic helps. You need people browsing on a Saturday. You need those foot traffic sales. The days when you just sat in your store and waited for people to come in are going by the wayside."

The focus on human interaction in the retail store of the future may be the thing that really surprises people. Ever since the Internet became a household fixture, there has been much talk of e-commerce and online stores supplanting brick-and-mortar retail. Don't believe it. As Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos told Seattle's Technology Alliance last year, online retail will account for 15 percent of the overall retail market by 2016, but "we are physical creatures, and we like to move around in our environment. We are not going to ever get to this sort of shut-in stage that some people were worried about."

The truth is that customers still want to browse. More than that, they want to engage in some type of experience when they go to a retail store—even if they had no plans to buy anything. Yet, they will keep coming back just to visit the store itself, and eventually they will put down money. If a retailer can continue to make the in-store experience a unique commodity—one that attracts people just to take a peek—the business will thrive.

"Retail is becoming experience. It's the one aspect online retail can't compete with. Retail creates theater that people enjoy, that people react to," said Piers Fawkes, who runs PSFK.com, a New York-based trend-watching website that tracks everything from the

latest Nike launch to green business practices to fleshmobbing (spontaneous, coordinated group theater in public spaces like subway stations). "The experience could be an emotional one, or it could be an educational one," he added.

While forward-thinking merchandising, interior design, high-tech sales tools and product will, of course, be essential aspects of successful stores, the real make-or-break quality will be something as old as commerce itself—community. That's the idea that consumers come in not just for a product, but also to be a part of some meaningful group. The specialty fitness retailer of the future will not necessarily be futuristic. Technology won't be the focus as much as human interaction, what Fawkes refers to as "theater." That theater is far more than customers looking on while a zealous salesperson demonstrates machine pulleys or buttons, or even a how-to demonstration by a buffed-out personal trainer. Customers must engage with the in-store experience.

"It has to be an experience that engages as many of the five senses as possible," said longtime fitness industry analyst Buzz Truitt, president of Optimum Business Performance, a consultancy to active lifestyle industries.

That means you can get an espresso or an energy smoothie in



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