



# Witness the fitness

What can retailers learn from Pure Gym, the UK's largest gym group? From giving customers what they really want to avoiding the hard sell, **Emily Hardy** offers some advice

**H**ealth and body-conscious Brits continue to pump blood into the gym and fitness industry. But there's one particularly lean gym operator that is racing ahead of its beefy competitors: Pure Gym.

Founded in 2008, the fitness company is now more than twice the size of its nearest competitor. Bulked up by its acquisition of LA Fitness in 2015, the low-cost operator now has 176 gyms in the UK and more than 930,000 members.

Retail Week picks out five lessons retailers could learn from Pure Gym.

## 1. Focus on what the customer actually wants

At the core of Pure Gym's success is its focus on what its customers really want.

Rather than getting weighed down by the frills and extras many gyms feel it essential to offer – cafés, saunas, Turkish baths – Pure Gym focuses on delivering the essentials for a good workout.

Its chief executive Humphrey Cobbold – former boss of cycling retailer Wiggle – says what 99% of gym users want is state-of-the-art equipment, good changing rooms, free classes, expert trainers and longer opening hours.

By cutting the excess fat, Pure Gym is also able to meet its customers' biggest demand – affordable membership, starting from as little as £20 per month, and no contractual commitment.

Cobbold says: "What Pure Gym has done is very simple. We have changed what was a £400-plus commitment into a £20 commitment – and people seem to like that."

When founder Peter Roberts pitched his model, critics claimed there wasn't the demand for a no-frills gym in the UK. He proved that listening to your customer can pay off.



## 2. Surprise your customers

Cobbold says that another key strategy for the business is to constantly surprise its customers – positively, of course.

"The comment we hear most frequently is, 'This is better quality than I thought. Where's the catch?' We are always consciously trying to surprise people with the high quality versus the low price. New users are always shocked by the size of the gyms, the cleanliness and the quality and range of the equipment."

Like retailers, which are getting better at offering flexible delivery options such as Sunday-night deliveries, Pure Gym has surpassed people's expectations by being open 24 hours a day. It has consequently scooped up a large number of wannabe gym-goers who work shifts or antisocial hours.

## 3. Keep it simple

Although Pure Gym is a complex, tech-enabled firm, it strives to keep everything simple from the customer's point of view. "Think of Apple," Cobbold says. "That's a complex bit of tech, but somehow they make it easy for us to use it."

The gym, which only sells memberships online, tries to make it as easy as possible for the customer to get what they want. Cobbold says: "The site is clean and functional, with no-one

forcing you to buy this or that. Users select what they need and we send them a pin code."

As well as being simple to join and attend, Pure Gym also makes it easy for customers to leave. "The whole process might as well be simple, straightforward, transparent and flexible for the customer," Cobbold says.

## 4. Keep on innovating

Like any good workout, if you keep following the same routine, your progress will plateau. Wary of becoming complacent, Cobbold says Pure Gym will always keep flexing its innovation muscles.

"It's very dangerous to stand still. We keep the spirit of innovation very much alive."

Pure Gym is experimenting with virtual fitness classes, which can be made available to users on demand, or on a timetabled basis.

It has also launched an 'extra' membership – like EasyJet's speedy boarding – and has started selling 'Gift of Fitness' gym passes.

## 5. Scrap the hard sell

Pure Gym has also scrapped the 'hard sell'. Instead of paying for teams of sales people, Pure Gym focuses on putting fitness specialists on the front line who are enthusiastic about exercise.

Not only is this refreshing for customers who don't enjoy feeling under pressure to make a purchase, it saves the business a chunk of cash too.

Unlike the average gym with a staff base of 12 to 14 people, most Pure Gyms operate with two or three full-time members of staff. John Lewis has also taken this tack, gradually introducing the narrative of "fewer partners, better jobs". **RW**

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Pure Gym**