

The Curves Phenomenon

No one has changed the thinking of every leader in the fitness industry more than one man, namely, Gary Heavin, the founder of Curves Fitness and Weight Loss Centers.

In the nine years since he launched his first franchise in 1995, not only has Heavin developed the largest fitness franchise in the world, but he has also developed the fastest growing franchise in any industry in any part of the world.

He has done this not by cannibalizing existing health club members, but rather by creating an almost entire new universe of health club members-an enormous untapped market of women for whom the mainstream health club industry was intimidating and uninviting.

In a sense, Gary Heavin and his wife, Diane, created the 'anti-club.' No mirrors, no lockers, no steam, no sauna, no free weights, no multiple lines of strength equipment, no 20,000, 30,000, or 40,000 square feet, no large start-up capital investment, no staying open 7 days a week, no operating 120 hours per week, no major build-out alterations, no group exercise studios, no group cycling, no aerobics classes, no huge payrolls.

Years ago, I remember talking with the legendary management guru, Tom Peters, who advised me then that the people who would revolutionize the mainstream health club industry would not come from the mainstream industry. Rather, they would enter the industry with different assumptions, different perspectives, different parameters.

That is precisely what has happened. In a sense, Gary Heavin caught the entire industry flat-footed. Without fanfare and without tipping his hat to mainstream fitness, Gary and Diane Heavin went about their business, hearing the nay-sayers every step of the way-but keeping their own counsel and listening to the counsel of their thousands of franchisees.

This past year, I had the privilege of attending the annual Curves Convention and visiting in a random way with dozens of Curves franchisees. I would describe them this way: they are passionate about what they do; they have a 'missionary's' empathetic understanding with respect to serving and helping women who have never exercised before; they view their jobs as exhilarating, uplifting, energizing; and they love the fact that their facilities are warm, small, intimate, interactive.

There is nothing accidental about Heavin's success. There is nothing unplanned or unpremeditated about it. People think they can improve on Heavin's model by upgrading and mainstreaming the concept. The jury is out on that. It is not yet clear how much of Heavin's success is due to the uniqueness of his concept and the uniqueness of the market that he serves, and how much is generalizable to more mainstream concepts and markets. The more 'mainstream' a mini-club begins to look and feel, the more likely it is that it will not attract the markets that Heavin has created.

Bottom-line, Heavin has done the industry an enormous service. Reminding us of the tale of Rip Van Winkle, who fell asleep for 20 years and woke up to find a changed an altered universe, Gary and Diane Heavin have forever altered the landscape of the worldwide fitness industry.

John McCarthy, Executive Director

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