

Pump Up the Jam or Turn Down That Music: Noise Issues in the Health Club Industry

Jul 18, 2016 Paul Nicolaus, contributing writer



Pat Benton enjoys the variety of activities she can find at large fitness clubs. She attends classes, works out with weights and makes good use of swimming pool facilities. What she doesn't enjoy, however, is being blasted by music she doesn't like.

While splitting time between homes in Grants Pass, Oregon, and Monterey, California, Benton has split time between two fitness clubs as well.

"The contrast between these two gyms is just amazing," she said.

In one, she can work out anywhere in peace or listen to her own music. In the other, however, it is impossible to escape the noise, she said. The music is played at loud volumes in halls, dressing rooms, weight and stretching areas,

which causes noticeable tension.

"I actually have physical changes," she said. "If the music is something I like, then I relax, and I enjoy my visit. If I listen to the rock or metal or whatever they're piping in, I find it really irritating. My shoulders go up, and I can't think of anything else."

Although club operators may say that the answer is for patrons to bring their own music and earbuds, Benton said that to drown out the background noise the volume of her music would have to be turned up to an uncomfortable and potentially harmful level.

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"I'd like them to turn it off entirely because it's so simple to put something in your pocket and something in your ear and listen to whatever you'd like," she said. "It's just not necessary to force people to listen to something."

Noise Battles

Benton's issue with background music is hardly a rarity. Though sound-related issues can range from weights dropping on the floor to group exercise instructors yelling through microphones, background music is generally the most common concern for clubs, according to Stephen Tharrett, co-founder and principal of ClubIntel, a brand and consumer insight firm serving the health club industry.

"Because you have such a diverse audience, some love it, some like it and

some hate it, so that's always a constant challenge for clubs," he said.

In addition, the background music has the potential to invade portions of the club intended to exude calm and relaxation, such as spa or massage areas.

Another common issue centers on group exercise areas, where music often plays at high decibel levels.

"Most are not designed for sound attenuation, so the areas that are adjacent to those studios get hammered with that music," Tharrett said.

Because many clubs share space with neighbors and some reside within residential areas, these types of issues don't just impact club-goers.

When Theresa and John Prue, franchisees of a TITLE Boxing Club in Prairie Village, Kansas, were approached about noise issues, they took action to sound-proof their walls in order to lower the decibel levels. A neighboring tenant located within the same building wasn't satisfied, however, and has since taken legal action.

It's one example of what seems to be a much larger industry-wide challenge. Club Industry has previously reported that [Chicago condo owners have sought refuge from the music emanating from Sproing Fitness](#) and an [Equinox Tribeca club in Manhattan is seeking \\$8 million in damages](#) from its new landlord for allegedly threatening to terminate its lease over noise-related violations.

As [the Observer reported in a piece focused on CrossFit gyms](#), the path for some club operators facing complaints has been to opt for a whole new location while others have stayed put and invested in the changes needed to resolve contentious noise levels.

Safety First

So what should all owners and operators keep in mind while thinking through

their own current club atmosphere? First, be aware that the level of noise within a club is an issue and work to ensure it is kept at safe levels.

"Sound isn't just aggravation for the people who don't like what you're playing," Tharrett said. "There is actually a physical level of sound that is unhealthy."

As the co-editor of the 2nd, 3rd and 4th editions of the American College of Sports Medicine's "Health/Fitness Facility Standards and Guidelines," Tharrett said that while the ideal decibel level is between 30 and 40, facility operators should keep background noise below 70 decibels, and group exercise classes should be held below 90.

"At a higher decibel level, you can damage the ears in just over an hour," he said.

Club owners must be aware of noise restrictions, too.

"Cities do have ordinances about sound levels, but more likely the challenge is what the landlord will stipulate in your lease based upon the type of mixed use that space has," Tharrett said. Usually the landlord will specify when music must be turned on or off, for example, and this can differ greatly depending on the setting.

All club owners should think through a policy and practice that works for their own unique set of circumstances, Tharrett said, but he added that many club owners have found that playing music that the majority of the membership is comfortable with at reasonable decibel levels tends to work well. It also allows those who bring their own music and earbuds to enjoy their own soundtrack.

Sound Solutions

Turning down the music volume is one obvious option for sound reduction, but other options can be considered, too, whether you are in the process of

planning the construction of a new facility or looking to make some adjustments to an existing club.

"Every wall, floor, and ceiling can be treated to deal with sound," said Christa Plaza, principal with Essenza Architecture, a full-service architecture and interior design firm. "You have to establish your budget first, look at the size of your space and determine what you can do."

Sound dots are one example of a relatively simple, inexpensive option.

"They are basically prefabricated sound panels that are about an inch and a half thick, and they have this sound-absorbing fabric wrapped around them," Plaza said. "They come in many colors and can be really fun."

In addition, sound attenuation panels can be added to the ceiling or walls of big, open spaces such as gyms or pools.

Sound attenuation between and around group exercise studios is particularly important, and the same goes for rooms that require quiet and calm, such as massage or yoga areas. Double wall systems with high sound transmission class ratings can help, Plaza noted, but if the price is too steep or not enough space exists for two walls, then staggered stud systems can be implemented as an alternative solution.

Regardless of the considerations, effective communication with club members can and should be a crucial component of the process, and Tharrett recommended using surveys to help make well-informed choices along the way about the type of music to play.

"Find out what they like and what they dislike, try to find where the consensus falls, and then communicate that to your membership and build your system based on that," he said. "You'll never get 100 percent consensus, but you'll find out what the majority go for and that can help you make your decisions."