

Choosing Nutrition and Fitness Software

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IF YOUR FITNESS CENTER DOESN'T USE NUTRITION AND FITNESS SOFTWARE, you may be earning less than you could. You may be working too hard, charging too much, and serving too few clients. Your work may be less accurate and less thorough than it should be. Without nutrition and fitness software, you're less productive than you should be. And if you're less than fully productive, you're leaving money on the table. It doesn't have to be like this. Modern nutrition and fitness software products offer you improved accuracy, comprehensive client reports, and the ability to get much more done in much less time. This translates into a more positive professional image, an elevation of your client's perception of your abilities, more value for your fee, the ability to handle much more work, more clients, more services to offer existing clients, and a better return to your bottom line.

Dollar for dollar, no other investment you make will impact your income the way your choice of nutrition and fitness software will. So the question isn't "Should I use nutrition and fitness software?" The real question is "Which nutrition software package should I be using?" But since no software package does everything, no single product will be perfect for every user... you will have a decision to make. Since your primary product is service, you can improve your bottom line by increasing the number of clients you serve or by increasing the number of services you provide to existing clients. Nutrition and fitness software will help you do both. To find the best software for you needs, keep in mind that you have an end objective... as Joe Beasley, CEO of Peak Athletic, Inc. and consultant to the health and fitness industry puts it: "People don't buy software, they buy solutions".

Basic and Enhanced Features

Modern nutrition and fitness software products support all the basic features - they allow you to calculate your client's calorie and exercise needs... for losing, maintaining, or gaining weight. They allow you to perform fitness tracking (exercises, activities, calorie expenditures), intake analysis (analysis of food records), information tracking (body weight, body fat content, measurements, body chemistry, etc.), and recipe analysis. These products help you generate exercise prescriptions, a wide variety of informative handouts, detailed reports, and professional eating plans to help your clients get on the path to better fitness and health. These basic functions form the core of what most health professionals need to do for their clients. You'll want to make sure that any software you select will perform these minimal functions, but it's also important to pay attention to a wide variety of productivity enhancing features that are available in today's latest product offerings.

Calorie Expenditures Report

One type of report that is very popular with health clubs and trainers is the "Calorie Expenditures Report." This type of report may go by a variety of names, but basically, it places your client's name and her most current body weight at the top of the report. It then lists a hundred or so activities and exercises and the number of calories that this person - personally - would burn in performing any of these activities for 30 minutes. In the best software packages, these calculations are based on the client's most recent body weight. If you give your client a goal of burning, say, 250 calories a day, they can look at their Calorie Expenditures Report and determine which activities they want to perform and for how long. They can mix and match exercises to reach their daily goal. As you already know, if they achieve this 250-calorie reduction goal every day, your client will lose a pound every two weeks from moderate exercise alone.

Because it is quick and easy to produce and has high perceived value, this type of report is popular as an incentive to joining your club or to use your services. It lets you avoid the time-consuming chore of specifying complete workout routines until the prospective client has become a client. If you're providing this service as an incentive (that is, "for free"), and you have several clients a day taking you up on this offer, you'll want to be able to generate these reports quickly and easily. Since you can generate a hundred individualized calorie expenditure reports like this in about a minute, it's easy to see why this type of report is becoming so popular with health clubs. It's quick. It's easy. It provides choices, variety and control. It helps your client reach their fitness goals. And often, these initial reports serve as the first step toward having your client hire you to map out a more traditional detailed exercise plan for them.

Customizable Client Assessment Reports

Like the calorie expenditures report, this customized report looks like you gave up your evening to create, but it takes only a second or two to produce. This report can be used as an incentive for joining a health club or for hiring you as a personal trainer. The idea is simple: you create a "setup file" that controls the contents and formatting of the client assessment report. Information about the client (first name, last name, current body weight, desired body weight, daily calories to maintain current body weight, daily protein goal, etc.) is inserted wherever you want this information to appear in your report and as often as you like. You can make your setup file as long or as short as you wish and it will genuinely look as if you spent hours preparing the report. Some products will let you create different setups files for client who are losing, gaining, or maintaining their body weight. This customization process gives you simple but total control over the contents and layout of your client's assessment report. And every report will be unique since your clients will have different names, data, nutrient goals, exercise goals, etc. Some products even provide "batch processing" so you can generate these Assessment Reports automatically for dozens or even hundreds of clients in a single pass. Sophisticated reports like these separate you from the crowd.

Fitness Manager

A Fitness Manager component is useful for tracking calorie expenditures from a wide variety of activities. Look for the ability to edit, delete, and (especially) add new activities. Make sure that all calorie expenditures for added exercises are calculated for you based on the client's most current body weight. You'll want the ability to enter the results from the latest health club equipment - the ones that ask you your age and weight, then speed up, slow down, and change inclines over the duration of the activity, then tell you how many calories you burned. Look for the ability to enter data from an indirect calorimeter (like the MedGem or BodyGem). Look for an override of calculated values (for instance, if doctor's orders prescribe a 1,000 calorie a day goal, then you should be able to enter this in directly and easily). Look for the ability to set up and track exercises based on Target Heart Rate Training methods. Look for packages that help you create "workouts" by combining exercises and scheduling them. The ability to organize your exercise into categories is a plus. A "gym log" that lets you fill in exercises, reps, sets, durations, etc. and allows you to print them for your clients is a useful feature. Some nutrition and fitness software can graph your client's exercise calories burned vs. time or exercise calories burned vs. weight change. The more capability you have, the more services you can provide and the smarter you look.

Track and Graph Body Fat Content

Most experts agree that the best way to achieve ideal body weight is by achieving ideal body fat content. For this reason, look for software that asks you to provide a "beginning" and a "desired" % body fat content, then calculates the client's ideal body weight based on the assumption that all weight loss will be fat and all weight gain will be lean body mass. It will be up to you, of course,

to assure that the client's exercise regimen is sufficient to make these assumptions hold. Look for software that will graphically track your client's progress by plotting body fat content over time, body weight over time, or both at the same time. This emphasis of body fat content is another simple way to differentiate yourself from the crowd.

Food Intake Analysis

A multi-day food intake (also called a "food recall" or "food record") makes it easier for you to make useful dietary recommendations to your clients. If you find that your client is taking in 57% of her daily calories from fat and that she thinks nothing of eating cheeseburgers, fries, doughnuts, potato chips, or milkshakes almost every day, your recommendations will follow easily and logically from your nutrient analysis. The key factors to look for when performing food recalls are ease of entry, versatility and flexibility. Most nutrition and fitness software packages let you record food intakes by using their software on your PC, but some programs provide software that your clients can install onto their own PC's and record everything they eat. And some provide software you can install to your client's PDA so they can record their food and exercise intakes while they are on the go.

Client-Side Intake Recorder. This software is included in some nutrition and fitness products. It works like this: You give the software to your client on a CD (or let them download it from your web site). They take the CD home, install the software on their PC, and record their own food intakes for any number of days. When they're finished, they click a button to email their information to you. You import their data into your nutrition and fitness software package and produce an in-depth intake analysis report, complete with recommendations. Save this report as a PDF file and email it back to the client. This takes a few minutes instead of a couple of hours if you have to do the work yourself. Look for an intake module that is royalty free, allows unlimited use, and permits you to post the software on your web site for your clients to download if they wish. Client-side intake recording software greatly reduces your work, involves the client in their own health care, and makes your services more affordable and profitable. Progressive health clubs use software like this to offer in-depth intake reports to new members quickly, inexpensively, and add on personnel.

PDA-Based Intake Recorders. Some nutrition and fitness software will allow your clients who use PDA's (Personal Digital Assistants) to record their food intakes and all their exercise and activities on their own handheld computer (PDA). You can transfer a database of foods and exercises to their PDA. They take their handheld computer with them and record everything they eat and everything they do for any number of days. On their next visit, they set their PDA into your cradle and transfer their data into your PC's nutrition and fitness software package. To you, the data will look as if you had painstakingly entered it yourself, except for one very nice thing - you didn't have to enter it yourself!

Client Information and Contact Tracking

Although most professional nutrition and fitness software place no limits on the number of clients you can track, they vary considerably when it comes to implementation and management of your client data. Top products allow you to track personal information, measurement data, body chemistry, and diabetic information as well as personal information and "log-on" information like name, age, gender, weight, etc. They let you assign your clients into folders so you can organize them by affiliation (health club name, company), special needs (weight loss, body building), or any other criteria you want to use to organize your client list. The better nutrition and fitness software products provide you the ability to track your client's contact data in an integrated database that you can export on demand into a format suitable for use with your email program for mass mailings (like a nutrition newsletter). More and more clubs and personal trainers are using email to stay in touch with and market their services to their client base.

Nutrient Database

Look for nutrition and fitness products whose nutrient database is wide (many nutrients) and deep (many food items). Some products track only a few thousand food items while others provide information for tens of thousands. The number of nutrients tracked range from as few as 20 to over 150 nutrient factors (basic nutrients, vitamins, minerals, amino acids, fatty acids, etc.). Look for a good representation of brand name foods, restaurant menu items, supplements, and "sports nutritionals" such as exercise recovery drinks, power bars, shakes, body building formulations, liquid meals, and weight-loss products that are geared toward a nutrition-conscious segment of the population - your customers. Look for the ability to add new food items that may be new on the market and haven't yet been added to the database of the existing version of your software. Look for the ability to track additional nutrients that your software may not currently track... this lets you monitor nutrients that you have a particular interest in but that the software maker didn't feel was important enough to include.

Recipes

Simple advice: look for software that dishes up several hundred professionally prepared recipes. You're already busy. You probably don't have hundreds of hours to invest in creating your own recipes from scratch. And make sure you can organize your recipes into distinct categories (body building, weight loss, vegetarian, hypertension, etc.). It's a waste of time to have to manage hundreds of dissimilar recipes lumped together into one huge listing. Having a ready supply of hundreds of recipes will prove valuable to you when you use them as the building blocks for your custom meal plans.

Meal Plans

The advice for recipes is also good for meal plans - choose a package that offers a wide variety of ready-to-use meal plans. Meal plans are collections of recipes and foods that have been organized into three meals and three snacks (or more) per day for some time period. These plans are designed to address a variety of "special needs" like balanced weight loss, body building, vegetarian, diabetic, healthy heart, low-carb weight loss, hypertension, Vegan, and so on. Professional meal plans for one special need at say, eight calorie levels, can take a registered dietitian a hundred hours to develop, so think twice about creating all of your own from scratch. Be sure you can record any meal plan to any client's intake since this will save you days of key stroking all these foods and recipes for every meal and snack for several weeks at a time. Look for packages that offer each meal plan at several calorie levels. And finally, look for meal plan editing functions so you can modify any existing plan to suit the needs of any particular client or use them as the starting point for new plans.

Web-Friendly Features

Increasing numbers of fitness professionals are using email and the Web to communicate with their clients and to market their services. This is a good reason to select nutrition and fitness software that takes advantage of the Web and its capabilities. Look for software that allows you to save reports (like recipes or intake reports) in a customized web page format, word processor format, or PDF format. (PDF files can be posted to your web site as a web page or sent to your clients as an email attachment. If your software contains an integrated client contact manager, look for the ability to export all your client names and email addresses into a format suitable for use with your email program so you can send your clients a monthly newsletter (or to send them special offers). If your software supports a web-based questionnaire, you can use it as a marketing tool to gather prospects... 100 hits a day, 700 hits a week, 35,000 email addresses, names, and personal information a year to send your newsletter to.

Professional Reports

The primary output from nutrition and fitness software is the report. Because your reports are often delivered to your clients just moments before you hand them their bill, it's critical for you to make sure your reports are commensurate with your fee. Client reports are not the place to cut corners. Provide your clients with colorful reports on quality paper - let your report convey professionalism and value. Make sure your reports are easy-to-understand, useful, polished, and comprehensive. If your reports are outstanding, you will increase your standing and improve your reputation with your clients. Professional reports will help you win your client's confidence and trust. And the word will get around.

Most nutrition and fitness software products offer "fixed format" reports in which the software maker pre-selects all the reporting options for you. Fixed format reports only have one look because all your options have already been selected "for" you. A better choice for high quality reporting is a package that supports "flexible format" reports. Flexible format reports allow you to select the nutrients analyzed, insert your your photograph or company logo, and let's you decide whether you want to include pie charts, Nutrition Facts Labels, client information, borders, drop shadows, dividers, colors, shading, page numbers, images, and a wide variety of other options. Choose a package that lets you save your reports in PDF, word processor, or web page formats.

General Software Shopping Guidelines

Look at your purchase of nutrition and fitness software as an investment. (This is a gentle way of saying that this stuff isn't inexpensive.) But the more the software can do for you, the more services ("solutions") you can provide. And the more services you can provide, the more quickly you'll recoup your investment. There are a variety of factors (like the features and capabilities discussed above) that you should consider when selecting the ideal nutrition and fitness software package for your needs. But there are also a number of general considerations you should evaluate no matter which package you select. Consider:

Investment precedes dividends. Low-end nutrition and fitness software products are inadequate for the needs of most fitness professionals. Professional software is designed to manage hundreds or even thousands of clients, provide a large nutrient database (the better products track over 20,000 food items), and provide the ability to save reports in a wide variety of Web and document-friendly formats. The bitterness of inadequate or missing capabilities will far outlast the sweetness of low price. But keep your eye open for discounts... discounts are often available to students, educators, and registered users of competing products. And if a lump sum payment is too difficult for you, some software makers will split your payment into two or three monthly installments for you if you ask. If you let price be your most important consideration or if you do sloppy or incomplete research, you may discover that sometimes, investment precedes losses.

Evaluate objectively. If you're reading an ad or surfing a well-designed web site, filter the fluff and see if there's anything of substance left. Make a list of "must have" features and make sure the software you end up with supports all your "must have" features. A product may be beautiful, clean, elegant, and priceless... it might even be the "Paragon of Perfection," but it may still lack features that you absolutely must have. Compare products side-by-side and feature-by-feature. Get the facts. Buy informed.

Annual fees? Discounts for upgrades? Some software companies send you an invoice every year (typically \$200 or more) for continued product updates and support. Some companies don't charge for continued product support. Instead, they offer toll-free tech support for as long as you use the product, provide free updates for the version you purchased, and offer discounted upgrade pricing for major new releases (typically about half the retail price). This way of doing

business gives you the choice of whether you want to upgrade or not... and it provides an incentive for the software developer to offer new releases that are worthy of the upgrade fee.

Go for more capability that you think you need. Let's face it - you can't be too rich, too healthy, or have too much nutrition and fitness software capability. You can't know all the features or reports you'll need before you've even met your clients. Don't put yourself into the position of having to apologize for your software's inadequacies. Your clients won't see your software's inadequacies - they will only see your inadequacies. Look for capabilities you may not have considered... you'll never know when one of those features will win you a new client or make an old one happy. And happy clients often bring you new clients.

Web Research. If your time is valuable, the Web is probably the best starting point for researching nutrition and fitness software. Anyone who's anyone is there and waiting for you. You get the facts quickly and you're able to compare products by reading the descriptions and following up with emails or phone calls. The links provided in the sidebar to this article may be useful in your research - and it only takes a few clicks to find out.

Contact the software maker. Email them a question or ten. Find out if they answer their email promptly and answer questions clearly and concisely. Call their sales number and express your interest in learning more about their software. Use this initial contact to get a feel for what it will be like to work with this company after the sale. If they have a sales pitch to deliver, hear them out. Give them the opportunity to convince you that their software is the best choice for your needs. Listen for compelling reasons to select their software based on the merits of their software and support. Then narrow the discussion to the topics in which you have special interest - your "must have" features.

Product Support. Does the company provide a toll-free number for you to call if you have questions about their software? Are you allowed to use this toll-free number forever? Or do you start paying for phone calls 45 days after you purchase the software? (If you have to pay for the phone call, it isn't free - in fact, it can be very expensive!) Does the software maker provide a detailed User's Guide with step-by-step instructions for every feature of the software? Do they provide 24/7 email support? Do they include narrated videos showing you how to perform the major functions of the software? Often, the only way to find out is to ask. And you can kill two birds with one stone if you ask them by email - you'll also learn what their email support is like.

Read the End User License Agreement. It seems that most software makers don't like to show you their EULA until after you've already paid for their software. But since the EULA governs your rights in using the software, it makes sense that you should read it before you purchase. This document will tell you if you have to purchase separate copies for your work PC, home PC, and your laptop. The EULA spells out all your usage provisions. It will tell you if several trainers can use the software if you install it on a single PC. This and all other usage provisions are spelled out in the EULA. This document will also give you a good indication of this company's attitude toward you, their customer. While many EULA's are reasonable, there are some that many would consider downright Draconian. Some companies post their EULA on their web sites and others don't. Be smart. Ask to review this document. Know what you're agreeing to before you agree to it.

Update History. Check the software maker's web site for their listing of all updates they've released for their software in, say, the past four or five years. If a software maker has made progress, believe me, they're proud of it and they'll want you to know about it. Their update history will itemize the new features, nutrient database updates, and bug fixes. Look for a record of continuous improvement. If you can't locate this information on the software maker's web site, contact them and ask them to provide you a copy of their update history. If they can't - or won't -

it could be because they've made little or no progress in the past few years and an itemized listing would make this all too obvious. When software companies withhold information, ask yourself why? Then ask them why.

Request an evaluation copy. If you have lingering doubts, ask for a trial version of the software. If you don't see a download page for an evaluation version on their web site, email them and request either a download or a CD to be mailed to you. Some evaluations are basically programmed presentations that walk you through the software - an idealized mini-tour while others are fully functional for some time period. Working with functional evaluation copies gives you the opportunity to play with the user interface, get a feel for the software's power and flexibility, and compare it - head-to-head - to competing products. An evaluation copy can also provide fodder for follow-up questions before you buy.

The Bottom Line

You live and work in a very competitive environment. Clients have many choices for their fitness, health, and nutrition advice. To stand out, you must project a professional image of yourself and your services. This means providing excellent reports, in-depth analyses, and easy-to-understand advice. You need to do this accurately, quickly, and at a price that's a bargain for your client. The right nutrition and fitness software can help you do this. But before you lay down your money, do your homework. Educate yourself. Start your computer, open your browser, and visit the web sites listed in this article's sidebar. As you learn about capabilities you believe will be useful, add them to your list of "must have" features. Email questions to the companies who market the products that sound promising. Follow up with phone calls. Listen to the software maker's sales pitch. Get the answers you need. Take notes. Discuss your options with your associates. Then narrow your choices down to the single best product for your particular needs. If you've exercised due diligence, you won't waste time wondering if you made the right decision.

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