

Gyms, spas stress value of fighting stress in hard times

By [Laura Petrecca](#), USA TODAY

NEW YORK — As cash-strapped customers cut spending, spas and gyms are doing all they can to keep a place in people's budgets.

Beyond deep discounts, some are adopting a recession spin: touting services as stress reducers, not indulgences, and highlighting the economic benefits of "wellness."

A Gold's Gym program — deemed "Fat-O-Nomics" — centers on money people can save by shedding excess weight. One stat: Being 50 pounds overweight burns nine extra gallons of gasoline per year.

"The cost of a lot of goods has gone up," spokesman Dave Reiseman says. "We're aware that there are stories out there asking, 'Is the gym membership worth it?'"

The Westin New York in Times Square has turned layoffs into sales opportunity. A "pink slip pick-me-up" spa promotion gives 20% off a facial from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. daily.

"If you're unemployed, you need a pick-me-up — and you need to look good on your interviews," spa director Nicole Morris says.

As spa owners "feel the pinch" of consumer cutbacks, they're also all aggressively touting good, old-fashioned discounts via e-mail blasts and website updates, says Larry Oskin, spokesman for the Day Spa Association.

Businesses listed on website SpaFinder's directory service are slashing prices, President Susie Ellis says. The number of discount deals offered on its website and in its e-mail newsletter is up 25% to 30% vs. a year ago.

Spa and health club sales for 2008 aren't in yet. But on the gym front, signs of trouble started last year. Membership dropped in 2007 for the first time in more than a decade to 41.5 million from 42.7 million in 2006, says the International Health Racquet & Sportsclub Association.

Debbie Goldman of Manhasset Hills, N.Y., is keeping up her gym routine, but saving. She was an off-and-on-again member of upscale gym chain Equinox for more than 10 years, but when she got her \$1,500 yearly renewal bill in September, she decided it was "too extravagant in these times." She opted for an LA Fitness chain offer of two years for \$1,200.

To cater to current clients — and lure new ones — Equinox is one of the gyms playing up "mind-body balance" in stressful times.

Equinox has run full-page newspaper ads and updated its website to promote "mind over madness." Say the promotions: "In these changing times, make a renewed commitment to yourself to lead a healthy life." Each has a list of healthy endeavors — such as meditating and eating well. Of course, exercise tops the list.

Recent ads from rival gym chain Town Sports International proclaim "Protect your most important asset. Your health." They also touted an initiation fee cut to \$59 from \$149.

Says Town Sports marketing chief Sean O'Hearen: "We're trying to encourage our current and potential customers to focus on things they can control. Your health is one of them."

Botox providers are also doing all they can to keep their bottom lines looking good.

To lure cash-strapped clients, plastic surgeons and dermatologists have rolled out promotions for the wrinkle-reducer, including a recent "Bootox" special for Halloween.

Botox injections typically cost about \$500 per site — such as between the eyebrows — according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. It says demand is firm but vulnerable. Botox-maker Allergan reported third-quarter sales up 7% to \$318 million, but short of analysts' expectations. The economy was a hot topic this month at the American Society for Dermatologic Surgery convention in Orlando, says Jeanine Downie, director of Image Dermatology in Montclair, N.J. What some docs are doing:

- Image Dermatology hosted a successful "Bootox" Halloween special with discounted injections. Now Downie is looking at a Thanksgiving event. "I'm going to say something like, 'Don't let wrinkles gobble up your face.' "

- On Nov. 1, Scottsdale, Ariz., dermatologist Susan Van Dyke hosted a Botox for Beginners event with free consultations, samples of skin care products and deep Botox discounts. "The economy is hitting everybody," she says.

- Beverly Hills facial plastic surgeon Behrooz Torkian now hosts a Beauty Day on Fridays that includes discounts on Botox and other services, says his office director Marcy Parco.

Beauty Day clients get extra pampering such as hand massages, makeup tips and free skin care samples. Many people now can't afford long family vacations or a "girls' weekend" at a spa, so these Beauty Days — where customers can spend \$500 to \$800 for a bundle of treatments — are a way to "feel good" in the downturn, she says.

It's also good for business: "It was a creative way to get the ladies in here," she says.

Natural cutbacks

Organic goods — once a pot of gold in the grocery world — may get dusty on store shelves as consumers slice their shopping budgets, says a new report from research company Mintel. "To cope with higher prices, many shoppers are simply opting not to buy pricey organic or premium brands," says Mintel senior analyst Marcia Mogelonsky. The market for organic foods and beverages still will hit \$7.2 billion this year, Mintel says, a rise of more than 140% from 2003. Yet, Mintel says year-over-year growth has slowed, and the grim economy is likely to further suppress growth.

Good press

Come June, a new awards category will be added to Cannes Lions International Advertising Festival: public relations. Awards in that arena will honor "the creative use of reputation management," according to festival organizers. Tim Bell, chairman of London-based PR and marketing firm Chime Communications, will preside over the PR jury. For the 2008 edition of the industry's biggest global awards show, there were more than 28,000 entries in the existing 10 awards categories, which include film, cyber, design and radio.

Private matters

Here's a picture that Sonic Drive-In surely wishes it were not part of: A manager of an Oklahoma City Sonic was arrested for allegedly videotaping female employees in the restroom. An employee discovered the camera — after it fell on her head. Police later arrested manager Timothy Billings, who was fired.

"This is a very unfortunate incident," says Sonic spokeswoman Nancy Robertson. "We're confident it was an isolated incident."

Side note to customers of the Oklahoma City outpost: Put aside any concern about being caught on video. That location has no public bathrooms.

Guess he inhaled

There's a new superhero in town: Smokerman. The character is a hero who — due to his cough from smoking — can't quite keep up with the other superheroes. He appears in new anti-smoking TV spots for the Utah Department of Health, created by Crowell Advertising.

Whether he's trying to save trains from crossing broken bridges, rescue people drowning in a kitchen sink or disarm pretend bombs, he keeps losing his breath and missing his chance to save the day.

Take a guess when the ads are scheduled to air. Yep, during morning cartoons.

Squeezing more sales

Faced with wavering juice sales because of concerns about kids' calories, Welch's 100% Grape Juice is pitching itself as a good-for-you family beverage, not just a kid's drink. Welch's has hired wacky food scientist (and Food Network TV star) Alton Brown to be its pitchman.

In new ads, Brown explains the Concord grape is an "amazing little fruit" that produces antioxidants called polyphenols when squeezed.

Food science "can get a little boring," says Chris Heye, Welch's vice president of marketing, and Brown "makes it fun."

In the 15-second ad, Brown explains how the little grape packs a fruity punch to create healthy hearts, minds and immune systems.

In the game

Welch's rival juicemaker Capri Sun is targeting kids with ads in video games. The Kraft brand will be featured in Wii versions of the video game *Rayman Raving Rabbids TV Party*, due out Tuesday. The game's crazy bunnies create mayhem — and disrupt interactive in-game ads, including some for Capri Sun.

In a cross-promotion, the game and its characters will be seen on 50 million Capri Sun juice boxes. The deal by Ogilvy Digital Innovation Lab came after research showed 98% of boys and 84% of girls in the Capri Sun demographic play video games.

Global media matters

This week, IBM will release the results of its second global online survey of consumers' digital media and entertainment habits. IBM polled more than 2,800 people in the U.S., the U.K., Japan, Germany, India and Australia during the third quarter of 2008. Here's a sneak peek at some of the results.

- 76% have watched video on their PC, up from 60% last year.

- 35% have watched video on a portable device or mobile phone, up from 22% last year.

- About 70% said they'd prefer an ad-supported model for PC and mobile videos, vs. having to pay to watch those clips.

- More than 50% of those who watch online video say they have reduced the time that they ch TV.

• Nearly 60% said they would provide a company with personal information about themselves — such as age, gender or lifestyle details — in exchange for something of "value," such as discounts to favorite stores or access to high-quality music videos.

ASK THE AD TEAM

Q: What's the story on the (delivery man) in the Miller High Life commercials? Damn, he's good.

• Hugh Hussey, Wilson, N.C.

A: Actor Windell Middlebrooks, 29, is the delivery guy who storms into high-end restaurants and stores and pulls High Life out because being in chi-chi places keeps everyday folks from living the high life. He's been doing Miller ads for two years and has a strong following. He appears at events (next is Nov. 22 in Columbus, Ohio), and Miller spokesman Julian Green says he gets "mobbed."

From Fort Worth, Middlebrooks studied acting at Sterling College in Kansas and the University of California-Irvine and now lives in Los Angeles. He had a recurring role on Comedy Central's *Weekends at the D.L.* and has appeared on *Entourage*, *My Name is Earl* and *Veronica Mars*.

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