

New age movement

As the daughter of a man who only started running in his late 60s and is currently training for his second marathon, **Aislinn Kelly** is well aware of the pull – and the benefits – of exercise for people over the age of 50. She talks to three experienced fit pros about catering to – and being part of – the older fitness generation.

What does age matter when you can run further – and for longer – than most 16 year olds out there? As Barry Grinham, the 62-year-old founder of Prime Energy Fitness Ltd (primeenergy.org), tells me, "We're living longer and people in their 60s and 70s have more time on their hands. They service their car, so why not service their body?"

For 35 years, Grinham has run a machine-based Circuit Weight Training class in a gym and he still welcomes many of the same members he did when he first began it. The class comprises 30mins aerobics and 30mins body conditioning on treadmills, bikes, cross trainers, rowers and total-body machines, and is aimed at "the company exec who wants to get fit without a beasting". He tells me, "The client base is 50+ and the class lends itself to the older client as they can mix and match. They all know what training zone they need to be in and what level they need to be training at, but they'll do it at their own pace."

Avoiding a 'beasting' is a recurring theme and both 72-year-old Sandra Ferguson (fergies-fitness.co.uk) and 54-year-old Noelle Watson (noellewatsonfitness.co.uk) are keen to point out that the more mature client doesn't want to go "hell for leather", as Ferguson puts it. "When I'm teaching my 50+ exercise to music class, it's not heavy aerobics – it's hi/lo. It's a bit of everything."

Keeping it real

As I chat to these three fit pros who have more years' experience in the industry than I've been alive, I'm desperate not to have a foot-in-mouth moment where, in my enthusiasm, I say something that sounds patronising. And this, it seems, is one of the potential pitfalls when working with the more mature client. Ferguson says, "If I have younger people covering my mature classes it doesn't always go down well. They can't relate to the age group like I can – I can say 'at our age' instead of 'at your age'! Don't be patronising with elements like the music. I might like a bit of rock and roll but I don't want to hear *Tiptoe Through The Tulips!*"

Watson, who works exclusively with women



over 40, adds, "My clients are professional women who are used to being treated with respect. They don't want to be patronised but neither do they want to feel beaten."

Grinham agrees. "I lead by example. If the coach is your age or older than you, it gives you confidence. I'm in my fifth decade of training and I have an extensive knowledge and vocabulary of exercise. I find the older clients appreciate that."

It's not all bad for younger trainers who want to work with this population, however. The

advice from Watson is to "give evidence that you are good at working with this population and that this population likes working with you. You have to imagine you are working with your mum [or dad]. What would your mum appreciate? How would your mum want to see herself?"

A growing market

Ferguson finds that, the older she gets, the busier she becomes with the over-50 age group. "They look at me and think, if she can do it, why shouldn't I? I would never find a job now at my age in an office. However, I find I'm being asked to take on new classes at this age. It's wonderful!"

It appears there's a growing market for coaching the more mature client. And it's a market that's largely untapped. Ferguson is puzzled that "some sports centres seem not to want to get into servicing this population. I find that a lot of older people don't want to get tied into a monthly direct debit, as many are retired and want to go on holidays."

Watson feels the industry needs to be more aware of the older population but should never underestimate them. "They have strength, stamina, determination and they listen!" she says. "The middle-aged women I speak to often say there's nothing for them in their 50s. They don't want to go to a seated class but nor do they want to go to Metafit."

While Grinham is finding that the average age in group X classes is 40+ – and he's not just referring to the classes he teaches but classes in general – it frustrates him that, "while the market is growing, many of the training courses are biased towards the younger generation. Older people may love yoga but they find Ashtanga yoga, for instance, very tough."

Staying power

The older population is loyal, according to Ferguson, and there's a social element that isn't always present with the younger generation.

"My over 50s will get to class a good 20mins before we start for a chat. It can be a real job to get them going!" Ferguson has a window before her classes that allows time for this socialising.

The social aspect extends to the class itself, with "a sense of security and camaraderie", according to Grinham. He feels that competition should be left at the door. "Whether it's how strong they are or what they're wearing, younger people are often competing, while the older population is there to remain active and keep their heart ticking over, rather than look good." He also feels each class should be fun. "I tell stories and make them laugh about my upbringing in East London. I might threaten to feed them a bowl of jellied eels if they don't do 8kmph on the treadmill!"

Ferguson points out that it's very important to offer alternatives. "Not everyone in class can do a certain exercise. In my 50+ classes I have four people who are uncomfortable getting up from the floor, so I adapt it. I have an 84-year-old who does the class mostly seated but it's great that, with adaptations, she can join in with my regular class."

The future

Grinham believes training older populations will be one of two prominent themes over the next decade – the second being obesity. "There's obviously been a lot of research into obesity but we need more into how to train the older person. We all have the same musculature but it changes as you get older – you lose elasticity in muscles, lung capacity diminishes and so on. We need to educate ourselves more. I also feel that reducing stress should be a really important aspect of training older clientele."

As we end our conversation, Ferguson is thoughtful, "As I get older, I sometimes ask my husband, 'Do I look a bit silly going out like this in my tracksuit and leotard?' But then I think, as long as my classes are full and I love it, why should I stop?!" **fp**

Attracting 40+ women

Noelle Watson has a women-only brand marketed at the over-40s. She believes in speaking to this population "in their own language. So many of the women I speak to tell me they've lost their sparkle. They want the 'old me' back. At age 45, women don't want to look ripped – they want to look sexy, curvy, have energy, gain confidence, wear the clothes in their wardrobe and start getting compliments again. So, I would avoid language like 'We're going to transform your abs and get you ripped!' I offer a free ebook called *How to Get Your Sparkle Back* and I display real testimonials and photographs of my clients on my website to show how they're getting their lives back. Prospective clients have to look at your marketing and think 'they're talking to me.'" Watson also runs several joint ventures with complementary businesses, such as hairdressers and beauticians, a referral scheme to attract clients' friends and she



offers a guarantee. On the advice of marketing coach Lucy Johnson, she also runs success panels, where she delivers a free workshop and, afterwards, brings a panel of her clients out to tell the audience in their own words what they have achieved since joining her programmes. "They do a great job of selling my services and I find new clients queuing up at the end of the workshop!"