



The International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association is a not-for-profit trade association open to investor-owned and member-owned fitness, racquet, and athletic facilities. Associate memberships are available to manufacturers or suppliers of products and services of use to IHRSA members.

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Are You Selling ... or Compelling?

Recently, I've been trying to "reconnect" to the basics of this business in a more insightful and instructive way. The core question: What's happening at the consumer level when individuals are deciding whether or not to join a club?



Bill McBride
IHRSA Chairperson

My inquiry was aided by the book *Predictably Irrational*, by Dan Ariely, a professor of behavioral economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT); and by an article, "Getting Customers to Choose You," on the HBR (*Harvard Business Review*) Blog Network, written by Art Markman, a professor of psychology and marketing at the University of Texas.

What I found interesting is that people generally make buying decisions on the basis of "comparables"—attributes, qualities, data, and other factors they can utilize to compare one product (A) to another (B). The process is informed both by facts ("Car A gets 24 mpg; car B gets 32") and personal preferences and beliefs ("Car A looks like Granddad's; Car B looks 'cool'").

Comparables, moreover, come in two distinct forms. Products have *alignable* differences (ones that can be easily compared, e.g., gas mileage, the price of a club membership); and *nonalignable* differences (ones where there's no simple matchup of major details, e.g., a Smart Car vs. a pickup, a large multipurpose club vs. a CrossFit "box").

Similar properties are relatively easy to compare, which is why there's so much "me-too" marketing and advertising in our industry. The challenge for any given club is to demonstrate the ways in which it's special, different—to pinpoint the things that make it the "right" choice. Here are a few ways to do so:

- Describe the common features shared by your club and the competition in a way that emphasizes your enhanced offerings.
- Help prospects identify the elements that are shared by your club and other facilities, transforming nonalignable into alignable differences, and, in the process, better positioning your brand.
- Explain how your club's unique features address the prospect's needs, wants, and desires, and are critical to their exercise success.
- Educate them about any new features or programs you've introduced.
- Encourage them to appraise clubs on a personal, individual level, rather than relying on an evaluation based solely on comparisons.

Knowing more about how people make use of comparables can help you to make better decisions. —

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