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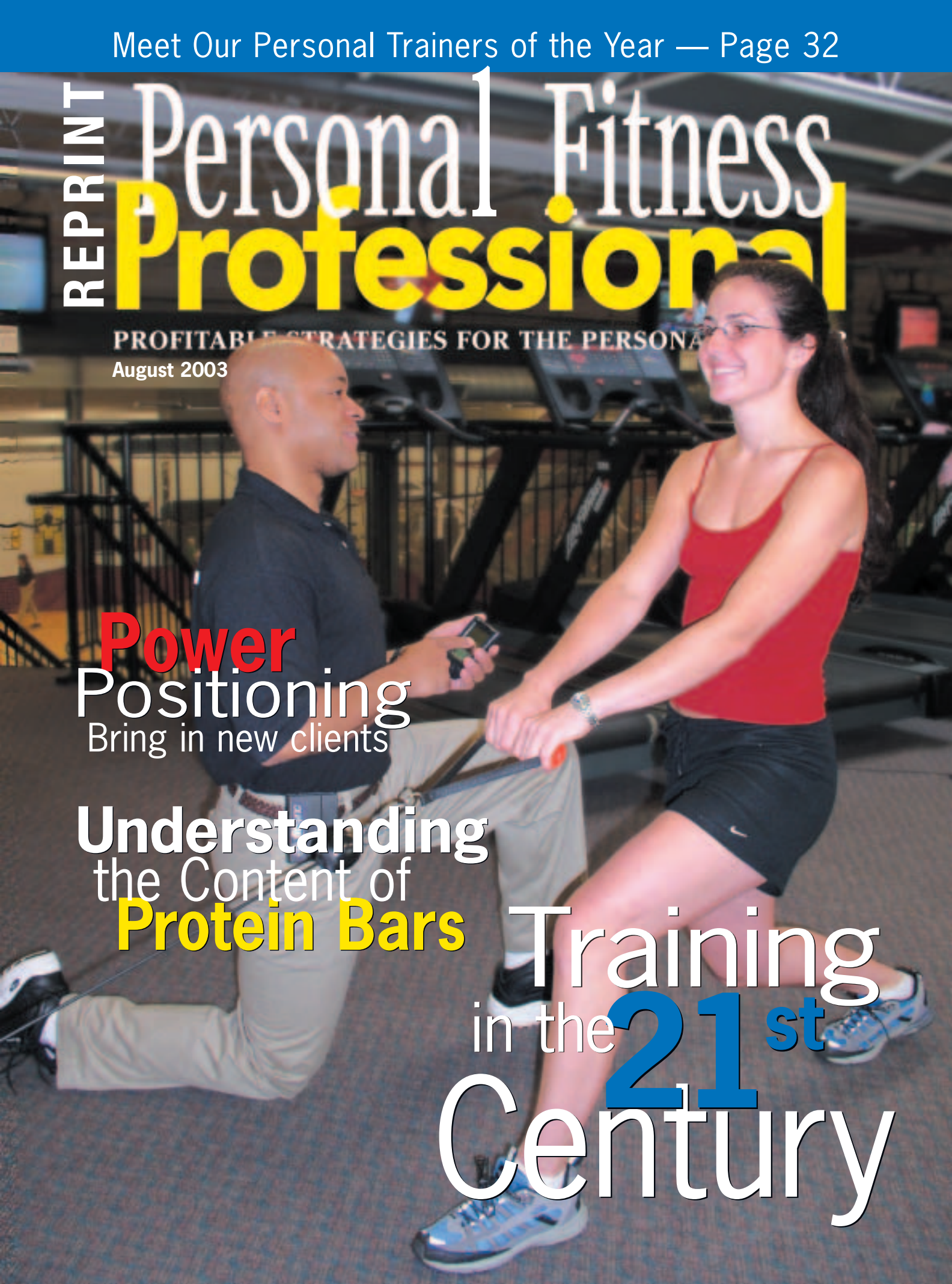
PROFITABLE STRATEGIES FOR THE PERSONAL

August 2003

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Training
in the 21st
Century

Personal Training
in the 21st Century

Moving beyond paper
By Paul Wittrock

ACE Personal Trainer of the Year, Stephen Holt working with client.

As a professional trainer, you know that if your clients can't see the progress they're making, motivation can be easily lost, and your recurring revenue stream could be affected. In addition, your clients need to fully understand the value you deliver as a trainer in order for you to continually strengthen their loyalty. Unfortunately, if you and your clients are still using traditional paper-based methods of tracking workout data to manage your programs, you may be lessening your chances of accomplishing these fundamental goals effectively.

For example, when was the last time you tried to review a client's progress only to find a myriad of notes, scribbled changes and abbreviations you're not even sure you understand anymore? What do you do with all this data?

And what about personalized programs that you've worked hard to perfect for each client? Wouldn't it be nice to re-use some of that information when you need it? Let's say you've had great success helping a 53-year-old man achieve his muscle development and body fat reduction goals. You then take on a new male client who has a similar build and set of objectives. How can you easily go back through all of the workouts for the first client to create a comparable program for your new client without spending hours in the process?

Consider the client who has reached a plateau. She's not seeing the results she wants and neither are you. How can you quickly examine her routine, review her history and get a clear picture of what she needs to change? How much of it will be guesswork?

And have you ever had a client become discouraged because, after a month of training, he sees no results? Maybe he hasn't lost the 10 pounds he was hoping to lose, but what he doesn't see is his reduction in body fat and increased strength and flexibility. Are you able to quickly and accurately demonstrate the subtle progress your client is making?

Finally, think of the bond you share with the regular clients you train several times a week. How do you maintain this relationship when these clients travel for extended periods? Can you develop a similar relationship with your less frequent clients such as those you train only once or twice a month? The success of our profession and our livelihood is based upon the ability to build and sustain close relationships with our clients.

Technology — Friend or Foe?

As a fitness enthusiast and former college athlete, I understand these challenges well. After years of workouts, I accumulated numerous notebooks and workout cards that became increasingly ineffective. And I talked to beginners and professionals alike who shared similar concerns. Because it wasn't easy to keep track of their progress, newcomers to fitness training felt discouraged and lost some of their initial drive to succeed. Professionals were concerned that, unless they could accurately measure their results, their conditioning and training programs could actually be harming their performance on the field. Perhaps you have encountered this same scenario for yourself or your clients.

The good news is, technology is changing things, making slow and inefficient paper-based fitness training processes a thing of the past while helping trainers strengthen their relationships with their clients for the long term.

As with all things, however, change can be difficult and even appear threatening in the beginning. That's because change requires us to

alter the way we're used to doing things. And, understandably, you need to be able to fully appreciate the benefits before you're willing to try something new.

The impact of technology on our profession is significant; it can either complement your expertise as a fitness professional, or it can be a crutch. The choice is yours, but always remember that your clients are buying your personal and professional credibility and integrity.

As a user and developer of fitness technology, I've made a list of the Top Five Technology Foes to avoid. They should help you make the right decisions about how to get rid of paper and make technology work for you.

1. Artificial Intelligence Systems — These PC or Internet-based Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems will automatically create a "personalized" program based upon profile information you enter about the client. AI systems can limit your control over the training program and may make potentially false assumptions about your clients' needs based on criteria that may or may not work for everyone. Training programs should be unique to each individual. Although there are some highly specialized and credible AI systems available, they each require the interpretation of an experienced trainer to ensure the recommendations are applied properly for each client. Over reliance upon an AI system will ultimately lead your clients to question your role and the value you provide. It is important to question the "intelligence" component of any AI system. Many purported AI systems are nothing more than a simple formula recommending a fixed percentage increase in resistance each week.

2. Trainer Replacement Systems — Similar to AI systems, these PC or Internet solutions are designed to replace the personal trainer. They do this by either offering personalized AI routines that may be used by consumers or by providing trainers with personalized client AI programs. This technology "shortcut" may seem like a time saver in the short term; however, it won't take long before clients realize they can print these workouts from the Web themselves. Technology shouldn't replace what you do; it should complement your expertise and make it easier to demonstrate value to your clients.

3. Fad and Hype Programs — We've all seen them, the training programs and "systems" that promise impressive results for your clients with little or no effort and great financial rewards for you. Often bundled with big trainer commissions, the emphasis is on selling promises instead of delivering results. Keep your clients in mind — if you don't personally believe in the program, don't risk losing the trust of your clients for a short-term gain.

4. Complex and Incomplete Systems — Some technology solutions merely replace one cumbersome system with another. If you still need to log your data on paper and then re-enter all that data into a PC, you'll end up creating more work for yourself. Preferred systems will include both mobile as well as desktop components to eliminate double work. If it's not easy to use, how can it be helpful to you? If it's too much trouble, you won't use it.

5. Proprietary Hardware and Gadgets — These typically involve unique and expensive hardware to run the training system. Any training system should run on standard hardware and operating systems (Windows, Mac, Palm, Pocket PC, etc.) so you're investing in software and not additional, single-use hardware. The exceptions are body composition testers or other biodata equipment, but for general program management, stick to multi-use hardware and operating systems.

Now that we've looked at what to avoid, you should also consider the Top Five Technology Friends. Some of the most important things to look for in your paperless training program include:

1. Information — Technology that enables you to easily track progress, and show that progress to your clients, is a key consideration. Merely logging data is insufficient unless that data is turned into information that you can use. After all, the number one barrier to an effective fitness program is the inability to clearly see results.

2. Connectivity — Consider how powerful it would be to stay connected with your clients anytime, anywhere. Look for technology that gives you that kind of relationship-strengthening ability.

3. Flexibility — You need to be in control of your clients' programs. After all, that's what you're trained to do. So again, look for technology that gives you the chance to make better use of your skills and knowledge, not limit or replace them.

4. Ease of use — A handheld device you can take with you to the gym is a good example of how technology can make your training time easier. But whatever technology you choose, it should be easy to use and understand.

Technology is changing things, making slow and inefficient paper-based fitness training processes a thing of the past.

5. Affordability — Technology that's designed with you in mind will also take into account your budget.

The fact is, with the right technology, benefits are numerous and can give you the ability to:
- Build your business beyond your facility and also increase your non-dues revenue.
- Deliver fitness your way.
- Demonstrate results and value.
- Increase productivity and quality and uncover hidden revenue.
- Enhance personal attention and communication.
- Strengthen customer loyalty.

To help illustrate how this approach to training can help you, here are three common scenarios.

Scenario #1: Progress at Work for You
As a fitness expert, you probably recommend tracking progress to get better results. After all, this is the foundation of what we do: make a plan, track progress and review the plan regularly to see if your client is reaching her goals. This is all about progress — recording it,

tracking it, measuring it and also responding to it. In other words, finally demonstrating progress (and your role in helping your clients achieve it) in easily understood ways.

Janet arrives for her training appointment and meets you in the weight room. Earlier that day, you reviewed her workout progress on a secure Web site, where you manage all of your clients' records. Each client has a private, personalized section that you both can access. In addition, the site enables you to run detailed charts showing progress in colorful, easy-to-read formats.

While online, you ran a chart detailing her upper body program, since this is what you'll focus on today. The chart revealed that Janet has consistently met her target resistance levels but tends to continually fall short on reps during the last set, especially when working on her triceps. Janet also made a note in her online journal that she feels like she just "runs out of gas" during her last set. You made some calculated changes to her routine and posted them on her Web-based file. You then downloaded this information to your Palm handheld so you could easily refer to it during your training session.

Janet also logged on before the workout and noted the changes. Although she too has the ability to download workouts to her handheld, she chooses not to bring it to her sessions, letting you manage her program for her during your training session. When she works out on her own, Janet takes her handheld with her and later uploads her workout log to the Web site for you both to review. Your clients who don't have handhelds simply use the site to review their progress.

Now you begin your session. You explain to Janet that she is making good progress; she's increased her strength and reduced her body fat percentage. You also share your concern about the shortened third sets and suggest a slightly longer rest period between sets as well as a reduction in resistance level for this last set. As Janet moves through the new routine, you note that her form during her bicep curls is off. Using your handheld, you record a quick tip about it in the notes section of the upper body program. This will remind Janet during future solo training sessions of what she needs to focus on. The session continues this way, with you making immediate workout changes as needed and entering notes to help Janet get better results.

When finished with your session, you upload the workout data for Janet from your Palm to the Web site. Later, when you're logged on reviewing the day's training sessions and preparing for the next day, you post a message to Janet: "Great job today. Keep it up!" Janet logs on when she gets home and reviews the session, pleased with the feedback. She'll be able to look at it again before her next appointment, since information is securely stored for future use.

In this scenario, Janet clearly understands the value you bring as a trainer. And she probably also feels more motivated to succeed because she knows she's getting somewhere with her workouts. But perhaps most important is that, even when you aren't conducting a face-to-face training session, Janet is reminded of your commitment in helping her reach her goals.

Scenario #2: Training from the Road
As our society becomes increasingly mobile, chances are that you've encountered situations where you aren't able to meet with your clients consistently. Missed workout appointments and long lag times between sessions threaten to hurt your clients' progress and your business.

Let's see how you can stay in touch with Janet even when she's on the road. Using mobile messaging, Janet sends you a note explaining she will be traveling extensively for several weeks and won't be able to attend any sessions during that period. You send a note back offering to manage her program remotely while she's away. She thinks this is a great idea. You ask her to let you know what kind of facility will be available so you can plan the right temporary program. You learn that there are several gyms she has access to but none with free weights. You quickly design a simple routine that combines basic cardiovascular activities with modified weight training based on the available equipment.

Janet downloads the new routine to her Palm handheld and takes it with her to the fitness facility while traveling. Each time she works out, she uploads the day's progress to you, sharing notes about what she liked or didn't like and how comfortable she is with the program. You post corresponding notes and make any necessary adjustments. Janet feels "connected" with you, even while she's away. And you regularly send notes of encouragement directly to her Palm handheld.

The ability to conduct training remotely is also extremely important if you're managing professional athletes who get paid to be fit. If it's your job to make sure they stay on track, this kind of mobile workout management feature will give you and your clients the winning edge.

Scenario #3: Flexible Workout Designs
Starting with a blank piece of paper is never easy. And it can also be constraining. Even outdated technology programs don't necessarily give you the flexibility you need to design workouts easily.

For this example, we'll use Janet again and her friend Monique. After you've been working with Janet for a while, she refers Monique to you. Monique has a very similar body structure to Janet, is only a few years older and really likes the results she's seen in Janet. She asks if you can "make her look that way." You tell her that although everyone responds to workouts differently, you will create a program designed to help her achieve similar results. She agrees to the plan but asks for one minor change. She would like to shape up her arms a bit more than Janet's, as she's always felt like they were way too thin.

You are pleased to be able to easily use what you've created for Janet. You pull up her file on the Web site and copy her original program to Monique's account. You then make any minor modifications that are needed and adjust the upper body program accordingly. You're now set to start working with Monique. In very little time, you've initiated a program you feel certain will produce the kind of physique she's seeking.

The Bottom Line
As a professional trainer, you care about the results your clients see and you understand that your business depends on it. The bottom line is, you need fitness technology tools that are as mobile as you are and deliver the value your clients need. Do your homework, and you'll find that getting rid of paper isn't as scary as it may seem at first. Technology can be your strongest ally. With that power on your side, you can be assured that your clients will stick around, and your business will continue to grow.

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