

The Health Club of 2025

By Patricia Amend

Rasmus Ingerslev, the founder of Wexer Virtual, has seen, and helped create, the fitness industry's future. Here, this technology sage assesses the dangers and the opportunities.



For years, technology has been driving innovation, constant change, and, yes, disruption in the health and fitness industry. Technology maven Rasmus Ingerslev, the executive vice chairman of Wexer Virtual, urges IHRSA clubs to embrace it. Here he explains why, as well as how.

To know Rasmus Ingerslev is to know an energetic, dynamic, creative, and highly focused serial entrepreneur who thrives on change. For him, the opportunities that change affords are so alluring that he embraces the attendant risks.

A competitor in virtually every way, Ingerslev first got involved in fitness as a member of the Danish National Karate team, earning several national and international titles.

In 2001, he cofounded fitness.dk, which, under his leadership, grew to become the largest fitness chain in Denmark, serving more than 120,000 members. In 2006, he cofounded the Danish Fitness & Health Organization (DFHO), an advocacy group for the country's fitness industry, an effort that led IHRSA to honor him with its IHRSA European Club Leadership Award in 2007. →





Wexer Virtual installation at Club Fizika, Russia

The Health Club of 2025

Next, recognizing the promise inherent in an emerging trend, Ingerslev created Fresh Fitness, a low-cost club brand. The company offered “live” instructor-led classes, as well as video-based programs, and soon emerged as the third-largest chain in Denmark. In December 2014, he sold the business to Fitness World, another Danish chain, which now has more than 150 clubs and 500,000 members—that in a country with a population of just 5.3 million.

The possibility of using technology to provide fitness services, explored in a minor way by Fresh Fitness’s video programming, intrigued Ingerslev, prompting him to create Wexer (World of exercise), an online club. That idea proved ahead of its time, but Ingerslev subsequently developed a different and more suitable distribution channel for the concept: Wexer Virtual, now one of the leading providers of “virtual” instruction in the world.

The firm, with offices in Denmark and the U.S., supplies video-based cycling and group exercise produced by a number of partners, including Zumba Fitness, LLC, and Les Mills International, to clubs and studios in more than 30 countries on five continents. Its client list includes most of the 25 largest global club companies.

Ingerslev is a member and vice chairperson of IHRSA’s board of directors, and also a member of the IHRSA European Council.

In the following candid comments, he shares some of the wisdom he’s earned during his 15 years in the commercial fitness sector, and describes his vision of the industry’s future.

1 The health club of 2025

“In the future, as I enter my club, I’m greeted by a robot: ‘Welcome, Rasmus—good to see you again! Your program for the day has already been transferred to the equipment you chose. I’ve added 5% to all of the leg exercises, since you did so well last time. Your friend, Dave, came in five minutes ago, and he’s also doing cardio today. Enjoy your workout!’

“As I imagine myself visiting a club 10 years from now, I’m struck by three remarkable changes: (1) the services offered, I quickly realize, are more flexible, and they’re not dependent on the four walls of the facility; (2) they’re even more customized; and (3) the training has become more social.

“All of these changes are going to be technology-driven. My club will understand me better thanks to extensive data-mining. Having tracked my past performance and physical activities both inside and, via wearables, outside of the club, it will *know* my interests and goals. That detailed knowledge will form the basis of its interactions with me.”

2 It’s all about me

“The club of the future will also know something about my DNA. As a result, it will be able to provide advice on how to work out to achieve the best results, and how to minimize the risk of developing life-threatening diseases. I’ll receive personally tailored suggestions about what I should do, when I should do it, and, conceivably, even with whom—personal trainers, my friends, other members with similar goals, or a virtual trainer via my mobile device.

“I’ll be able to do the classes I want, whenever I want, with the best instructors in the world. It might be a class taught by a live instructor in the club; one streamed over the Internet, with a thousand participants, taught by a celebrity trainer; or one that’s been prerecorded.

“For outdoor pursuits, I can team up with the gym-buddies I’ve been paired with by the club on the basis of its data-mining activities. ... And if I sometimes feel like working out at home, I can get a recommendation about what to do with equal ease, or follow a program in my living room in front of my virtual-reality Internet-connected device.

“In short, fitness offerings will be more personalized, more flexible, and more social. More importantly, for operators, the physical plant will no longer define their business; instead, it will be defined by all of the ways in which, and how well, they engage their members.”

“Over a period of just a few short years, the incredible advances in ‘smart’ technology have provided consumers with more choices and greater convenience than ever before.”

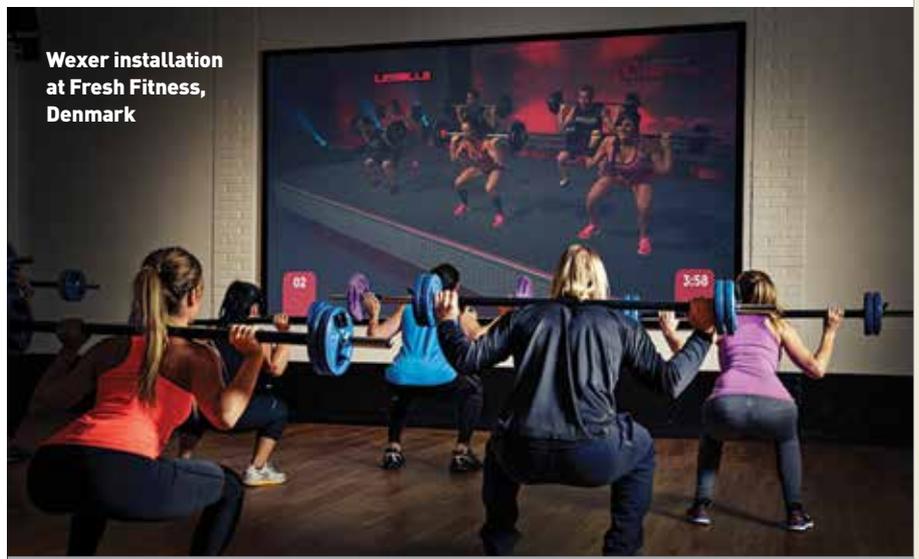
3 The future is now

“Over a period of just a few short years, the incredible advances in ‘smart’ technology have provided consumers with more choices and greater convenience than ever before. Today, people not only want, but fully expect, the freedom and control that permits them to do things on their own terms and on their own schedules.

“Wearable devices, health and fitness apps, and streaming exercise classes are brilliant examples of the new tech-driven, consumer-centric methods of delivering service that are affecting many industries, including our own. The walls of clubs are being battered down by these powerful developments, letting in, I might suggest, a bit of fresh air.

“Studies have shown that intelligent, robot-like devices can, in certain cases, diagnose patients more accurately than physicians. It’s inevitable that the day will come when such systems will be able to handle personal training, group exercise, and many other club functions better than humans. And because technology is developing exponentially, rather than linearly, there’s good reason to believe this will happen sooner rather than later.

“But what about the human touch? you ask. Well, don’t be too sure that members will be able to tell the difference. Back in 1950, the British mathematician Alan Turing, the subject of the movie *The Imitation Game*, created a test to gauge a machine’s ability to exhibit intelligent behavior equivalent to, or indistinguishable from, that of a human. A machine *passed* that test in June 2014.”



4 Consider the evidence

“Assuming, rather safely, that the answer to the question of whether technology will transform our industry significantly is ‘Yes,’ that leaves us with the question of ‘When?’ Well, bits and pieces of evidence strongly suggest that the answer is ‘Now.’

“For example: Consumers have purchased more than 200 million wearables. Several club companies are already offering DNA analysis. More than 120 million people are using UnderArmour’s health and fitness tracking apps, and that’s just one company. That figure approximates the total number of people, worldwide, who hold a club membership today.

“The fact that these bits and pieces don’t currently exist or circulate within the same ecosystem poses a challenge for club operators. My prediction: the ‘big’ *when* will occur when these elements align, connect, and begin to interact. That doesn’t mean you should wait until then to make use of the technology that’s available now. To the contrary, I believe that, if you choose wisely, there’s a lot of value in being an early adaptor.”

5 Experience is the best teacher

“As an early adaptor myself, I’ve learned some valuable lessons. In 2008, when I was attempting to create an online gym, I was sure that I’d seen the light, and, so, I left a safe position as the CEO of fitnessdk, →

The Health Club of 2025

pushed forward aggressively, and invested significantly, only to learn that, while the idea may have been right, the timing was wrong.

“I discovered that, even if my concept were technologically feasible, I was ahead of the market. Fortunately, however, I’d learned a great deal—enough to keep the company afloat, and, eventually, reinvent it as Wexer Virtual, now a successful provider of virtual classes worldwide.

“My two take-aways from my years of hardship, which I believe apply to current industry challenges, are: (1) don’t worry about *inventing* a new thing; and (2) time to market (TTM) is a more important factor.

“With respect to No. 1—again using my own startup as an example—I was so focused on creating something *unique* that I decided to do all of the development myself, rather than use an existing platform, tweaking my idea as necessary. With development, you never know exactly what you’re going to wind up with; it always costs more than expected; and it always takes longer than anticipated.”

6 Leave development to the experts

“Even if you’re compelled to create something new, you’d be well advised to admit that you’re a club operator—not a developer. You could, in fact, design and construct your own treadmills—but you don’t. You could write your own spreadsheet software—but you use Excel or something of the sort. Why? Because you know what the product costs, when it will be delivered, and that it will be supported and constantly improved upon.

“But, what about maintaining a competitive edge? you ask. Personally, I don’t believe it’s the uniqueness of the tools you use that makes the difference. My advice: choose proven, robust, and scalable services, and invest all of your effort in *how* you apply them.

“And, getting back to No. 2: I believe that TTM is more important than virtually anything else. In today’s market, it’s not the big who eat the small. It’s the swift who eat the slow.

“Remain vigilant when it comes to TTM. As I discovered, being ahead of the market can be as costly as being behind.

“Fortunately, there are sources you can consult—your members, the public, and the market—to determine if your timing is right. Today, it’s easy and inexpensive to conduct surveys. Do it! It will help ascertain whether, with respect to introducing new services, you’re too early, spot on, or too late.”

7 Seize the day

“The fitness industry has recently experienced dramatic changes, and that’s likely to continue, with technology serving as the key driver. If you’re not convinced, just look at other industries. Today, with respect to lodging, the biggest provider is Airbnb, which doesn’t own *any* real estate. The largest taxi company in the world is Uber, which doesn’t own *any* taxis. The most popular media platform is Facebook, which doesn’t own *any* ‘content.’

“In our industry, one of the biggest providers of fitness classes is ClassPass, which doesn’t own *any* clubs or studios, but has a market value exceeding that of several major club chains.

“Assessing, understanding, and adjusting to this new world, this radically altered competitive landscape, is very challenging, and, yes, a bit dangerous, but, as far as I’m concerned, it’s also very exciting. Inside every obstacle, I’m convinced, lies an opportunity.” —

—Patricia Amend, p.amend@fit-etc.com

LIVE! IN PERSON! RASMUS INGERSLEV

Looking for extra advice on how to make your business even more successful? Be sure to attend Rasmus Ingerslev’s presentation at IHRSA 2016 in Orlando on “Future-Proofing Your Club: Innovation of Technology and Your Business” on Monday, March 21st from 3:15–4:15pm. In addition, Ingerslev will moderate a panel discussion on “Building Multi-Million-Dollar Fitness Businesses”. The panel, scheduled for 11 a.m. on Wednesday, March 23, will feature Christian Ask, the owner and CEO of the Fitness24Seven Group, Valerie Bönström, the CEO of Mrs. Sporty and David Long, the CEO and Co-founder of Orangetheory Fitness. —