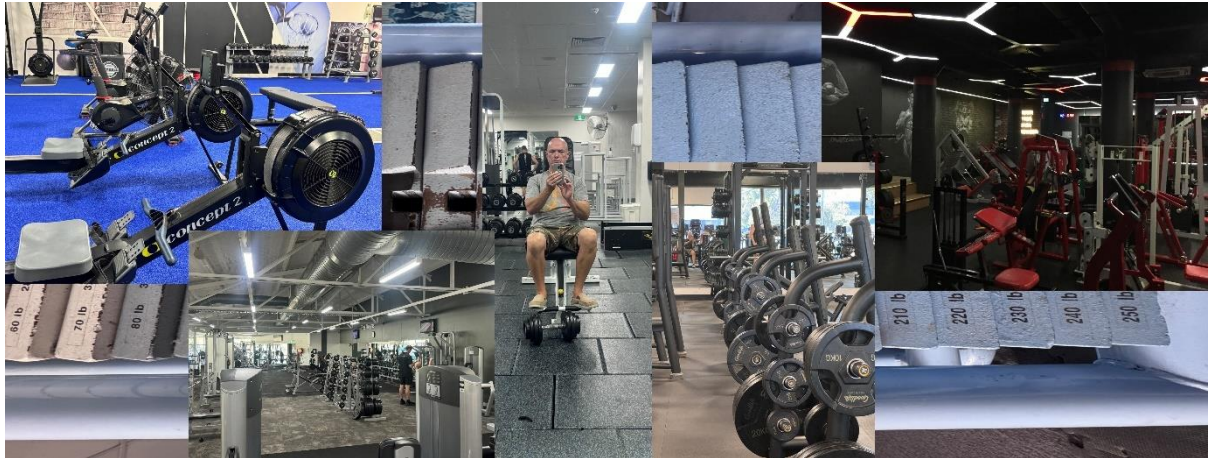


What Makes a Gym Worthwhile To Join?

Shôn Ellerton, April 27, 2025

I've been a member of many gyms in my life, but which kind of gym gives the best return on investment making it worthwhile to join?



Going to the gym!

It's a regular ritual for some, but for many, it's often a quick fad based on something like a New Year's resolution or some other act of self-induced wellbeing.

In fact, most gyms determine their capacity on well below fifty percent of membership because, on average, fifty percent quit after three months and up to ninety percent quit after six months. The data is quite variable, but they're not particularly surprising figures.

These dismal attendance figures usually result from one thing alone. The gym wasn't a good choice to begin with.

I started going to the gym in earnest in my late twenties, and throughout the years, have been a member in almost every kind of gym conceivable due to moving from place to place in the UK and Australia because of everchanging career opportunities.

What makes us want to get up and go to the gym?

What is it that ensures that we stick with it?

And, of course, is it worth it?

These are probably the most common questions that we ask ourselves before joining a gym.

Of course, there is the question that all of us need to answer and that is this. Why go to the gym?

The answer, obviously, is to better our physique and well-being.

I think the most important decision is to consider which gym to join. Is it the right one for you and will you get the maximum amount of benefit from it?

The answer to that question is most undoubtedly, convenience, in my opinion. Based on my own experience, out of all the gyms I've been a member of, the ones which I frequented the most and maximised my time with are those gyms which are convenient.

I've been enticed to join gyms which offer free towel service, wonderful spas, steam and sauna rooms, excellent parking, state-of-the-art machines, and an unlimited variety of classes. However, all of these gyms were either a good twenty minute drive away or inconveniently located in another direction from my workplace. Twenty minutes may not seem a long way to go, but surprisingly, it works out to be quite a distance if having to do the trip four to five times a week. I paid up for a year for one of these gyms and, disappointingly, lost all interest in the gym because I had to go out of my way to get to it.

On the flipside, I've been a member of one of those small and, often, grotty gyms one may encounter somewhere on the high street or hidden somewhere in the backstreets of a suburb. They often have poor or no parking available. They are often not the most hygienic places either. Toilets which are not cleaned well. Bad changing rooms which are too small with floors that one simply does not want to touch with their bare feet. However, hands down, I got the best bang for my buck in terms of getting better into shape with these gyms.

Why?

Because it was convenient to get to. That's why I chose it. And not only that, I wasn't bound into one of these complicated contracts and answer a lot of personal questions. And, unlike one of these aggressive franchise gyms, I wasn't going to be hounded by promotions and trainers wanting to sell you additional services.

But there was something else with this grotty small gym which made it truly a worthwhile investment. I've often wondered how these small gyms survive against these large, grand, and shiny gym franchises like Fitness First, Anytime Fitness, Snap Fitness and LA Fitness. Why on earth would anyone want to go to a dingy gym with crappy facilities?

And it is this.

It's being intimate with the gym and forming a group of like-minded buddies.

There was one I attended in the market town of Ashford in the English county of Kent when I was in my late twenties. It was located right in the high street and it was a five-minute walk from work. Furthermore, I could walk home from there in another ten minutes. I went there practically every day after work and, being a small gym, got to know every regularly-attending gym member there. Granted, I was single at the time, so had no family commitments to see to.

The machines were really basic, the changing room was one horrible room lined with coat hooks and a bench to sit on. Well. One for each of the sexes at least! There were no lockers. And there was one toilet each for men and women.

This gym attracted some real die-hards, which, as I was later to find out, seemed often to be the case for these type of gyms. What made this gym particularly successful for me was its circuit training class which occurred twice a week. Back in the 90s, circuit training was quite popular, but steadily got overtaken by body pump classes and fancy-sounding classes, like HIIT, or high-intensity interval training.

None of these newer variants had the same appeal to me. I attended body pump classes in a gym in Watford, just north of London. It was the closest thing they had to circuit training but it was bloody boring. Everyone stood facing forward with a bar bell and weights at their feet taking orders from the instructor to do this and do that. It was repetitive and no one really got to know each other because of the way it was laid out.

Also, most of these classes were quite specific to the type of workout which meant having to attend multiple classes to get the best results. Which meant a greater circulation of people turning up but not really having the opportunity to know them well as they tended to be more transitional. Circuit training, at least the one I attended, had all of it, the closest these days being that of CrossFit training. And for a small gym, a regular circuit training class was all that was needed to keep

the regulars together. Although, I remember there was a spin cycle class as well, but never attended it because I'm not a big fan of cycling.

Camaraderie is most important in these classes because it gets you into a routine and self-improvement by working with others who are on the same track. In fact, I was invited to take up rugby training by one of the rugby chaps who did circuit training there. I gave it a go for a while but, in frustration, gave it up because I had ZERO hand-eye ball coordination. By the time I managed to secure an unpredictable egg-shaped ball in my clutch, two to three 18-stone muscle-bound blokes would pile on top of me. Despite being a wiry guy weighing 75 kilos and being able to run half marathons at a reasonable pace, these guys could outspurt me anywhere on the pitch.

It also didn't help when I turned up to the office on one too many occasions complete with bruises, cuts and an occasional black eye. The manager, who I considered a bit of a ponce, first disapproved of my 'severely' short haircut, as I had shaved it off because of male-patterned baldness. But then disapproved of my appearance after a particularly rough bit of rugby training. After all, I worked for a client-facing engineering consultancy and he thought it would look ungainly for the company to have a skinhead in a suit with cuts and bruises interact with the clientele. I was a graduate engineer and I was told what to do!

But with all the guys and gals I trained with at the gym, I got to know quite a few of them socially. I had more weekend drinking buddies and had a couple of flings with some of the girls who I trained with. It was very much a train hard and play hard mentality. They were good times.

Going back to what makes a gym worthwhile, is the issue of timing. In other words, *when* to go to the gym. I appreciate everyone is different, but I train during the day and *never* after returning home after a day's work. The thought of having dinner and then going out to the gym simply did not work for me. After dinner was a time for me to be a lounge lizard, which was mainly listening to music, playing a video game, or watching a flick. I also ate early because my daily routine started at 6 AM with a five kilometre run.

Later in life in my mid-forties or so, my wife and I thought it would be a great idea to join the same gym in which we could go to in the evenings after dinner instead of relaxing and watching something on the box. That never happened. And, I would probably not be wrong to state that this is hardly uncommon between couples. It just doesn't work. You wait for each other to get ready. One

is in the middle of doing something. The other has extra work to do. One is too tired. All sounds good on paper, but... no.

Gyms need to be convenient and convivial.

Large franchise gyms with no soul often lose their clientele because those who sign up for them tend to get bored with them fairly quickly. However, these gyms make up that revenue and more by generating new customers through aggressive sales campaigns and then signing them up with draconian initial annual no-exit contracts.

My son attends an independent math class twenty minutes down the road which lasts around an hour or so per session. Conveniently, there is a small independent gym next door. It's basic, its cheap, and it's got all I need to do an all-around workout. It's tired-looking and can do with a fresh lick of paint. The machines are old but perfectly okay to use. The carpets are worn down and the posters advertising body building events from years ago on the wall had turned to a pale blue after being in the sunlight for so long. However, it was quiet and the two ladies running it, who happen to be ex-professional bodybuilders, are as friendly as pie. They even know my 10-year-old son after he finishes his math class when he comes to the gym to 'collect' me. They proudly show him whose on the posters when he asks who they are.

There was another gym I used to attend in Adelaide's Chinatown. Again, I went here because it was convenient when I took the train to work. I got off the station before the last stop and walked to the gym which was halfway to work. So, each morning, I got my morning workout including a bonus twenty minute walk. It was a peculiar looking gym. It was located downstairs in the basement. The predominant theme was black and red, including the machines. It had an uncanny resemblance to some dodgy BDSM dungeon. It even had a bar area with plumpy red armchairs and sofas serving energy drinks. Turned out that the place used to be a nightclub which catered mainly for the gay community. Nowadays, the gym is a favourite for die-hard body builders, most of which, are Chinese. Again, like most of these small gyms, the changing room was tiny and horrible and the restrooms were nothing to be particularly proud of. But the people there were great and I got to know many of them.

There are, of course, other factors that decide what makes a gym good or not.

For one, there should be the availability of good no-nonsense basic weight training equipment. When the new craze of Nautilus gym equipment came out, in earnest, during the late 70s and early 80s, many gyms got rid of their old multigyms and even their free weights. These machines were designed to restrict movement so that you didn't lift improperly. In principle, the idea was founded on good intentions, after all, safety is paramount to any gym. However, most die-hard workout enthusiasts aim for the free weights, the multigym equipment, and the machines designed to hold discs of free weights. Go to any modern gym, and I guarantee you that the fancier Nautilus-type machines are often used by those who are not your typical 'gym bunny'. I'm not suggesting there's anything wrong with these machines. I tend to use them in combination with the more die-hard basic equipment.

Another factor is opening hours. Many gyms these days, even some of the smaller independent ones, have 24/7 access. For those with unusual working hours, these gyms are absolutely essential.

Yet another factor is ambience.

What puts me off with most of the large commercial chain gyms is the overly loud background music which they deem to be essential to create that so-called energy vibe. I went into a gym called Derrimut's in south Adelaide. It was a large brightly-lit gym filled up with, what seemed to be, hundreds of machines. It was certainly clean and shiny and attracted, not so much bodybuilders like the small gyms do, but what I call the 'posers' in tight-fitting tank tops who wanted nothing more than to show off their physique to others. The music they played was this sort of 'boyz in the hood' rap-like music which I abhor. Despite having noise-cancelling headphones, I could still hear that crap come through.

A good gym should not have excessively loud background music. Why do they need music at all? Everyone has their own headphones these days which are coupled with their smartphones.

With my experience of gyms, there was, perhaps, only one large commercial chain gym which worked for me. And that was because it was located next door where I used to work in the city. Being a multilevel gym with many classes, exercise rooms, fantastic locker facilities, clean showers, a sauna and a steam room, I did get very good use with this gym. But, again, it was only because of its amazing convenience. As for the social aspect, it wasn't a great place.

A classic tactic that commercial chain gyms like to promote is an extra service at additional cost which allows you to go to any of its other sister gyms nationwide. Seldom is this good value because most who take it up nearly almost always goes to the one gym which is most convenient. As for those who travel on business, which, in itself is often a tiring affair, it is rare for them to feel the need to hunt down the nearest sister gym. Considering that many hotels designed for business customers already have a small gym in-house, why bother trying to navigate a strange neighbourhood, often when it gets dark, looking for a gym?

I certainly wouldn't.

For those who live out in the country a long way from anywhere, it may be better value, space providing, to invest in a multigym along with some free weights, a rowing machine, and perhaps, an elliptical or Nordic machine. There are plenty of second-hand options out there and there are no subscription fees once purchased. For me, in addition to going to the gym, I possess a pair of dumbbells and a mat which I can use to do the basics like push ups, sit ups, and bicep curls all at the same time while watching a movie on TV.

A final thought can be made to the cunning way gyms fish for potential customers. Many out there who think about going to the gym are lured by free trials. They ruck up to a new flashy gym and given a friendly induction by one of the staff members. Gym management strategy is quite interesting. During the first session, the staff member takes enough details from you in order for them to select the right staff member to assist you during that first free training session. In large gyms with many staff members, I've consistently seen older women get inducted on training sessions by fit young Adonis-like men and, likewise, men wanting to lose that beer belly getting inducted by Lara the Tomb Raider.

And oh! How they are so incredibly persistent in getting you to part with your money for that yearly subscription! And if you try to quit later, they will entice you with amazing offers you'd be foolish to dismiss.

Lastly, choosing the right gym is a personal thing, but I think, ultimately, a gym is only good value if it is convenient and doesn't require going out of the way to use it. If the gym is also a great place to socialise and meet people, you're onto a winner.