

A SECURITY PRIMER

By Liane Cassavoy

Keeping Your Members, as well as Their Belongings, Safe

You spend a lot of time and money keeping your club clean, polished, and full of the latest amenities and fitness equipment in hopes of attracting new members and retaining the ones you have.

All that effort is worth it to keep your club successful.

But there's something of a downside: The more attractive your club is to honest consumers, the more appealing it may be to thieves and other lawbreakers.

Your members, who are likely to be fairly affluent individuals who come and go on a regular basis, are the perfect targets for crimes of various sorts.

The bad guys may be eyeing everything from the cars your members drive, to the expensive, high-tech devices they bring with them when they work out, to their credit card numbers and other information related to their identity.

When it comes to crime, pretending that potential problems don't exist doesn't make any sense. Better, instead, to rely on the latest technology, as well as some old-school, time-tested methods to safeguard your club, your members—and your reputation.

INSIDE AND OUTSIDE

Securing your club should start with the surrounding area, says Bill McBride, the president and CEO of Active Sports Clubs (ASC), which operates 10 commercial health clubs in the San Francisco Bay Area. He notes that there's long been an issue in the industry with car break-ins.

"The first perimeter is the parking lot outside of your club. External lighting and video surveillance that's very obvious can serve as a deterrent," he suggests, noting that ASC uses such systems in all of its locations with their own parking lots.

The next step is controlling access to your facility, something that can be done with a combination of technology and staff assistance.

These days, there are a variety of methods to employ, including turnstiles, cards to scan, and biometric systems that read and verify members' fingerprints before allowing them to enter. While fingerprint technology is in use in a relatively small number of facilities right now, more clubs are considering it.

For its part, ASC relies on a club management software system that displays a picture of the member when they scan their membership card, so the front desk staff can visually identify them before granting access.

Of course, that security feature works well only if the staff uses it well, notes Josh Mello, ASC's director of facilities and services. "One of the most basic, but effective, ways to manage entry to your club is through strict operational standards—making sure the front desk staff checks in every member. That means the desk must always be staffed, and every member must have a picture on file and be personally greeted," Mello explains.

Staff also must be trained to deal with those folks who aren't members of your club, including guests, potential members, and even contract workers who need to enter the building to make repairs.

All guests who are going to work out should be asked to provide a photo ID and sign a waiver, something that can be managed within a club management system similar to ASC's, McBride notes. This may deter criminals, who may be less likely to enter your club knowing that you have their photo and personal details on record.

And, since you're asking for personal information, you must ensure that your staff handles it properly. They must collect only what's necessary and enter it promptly into the software system you're using.

Personal data should *never* be jotted down on a piece of paper and tossed into the trash, since it could easily wind up in the wrong hands.

AROUND THE CLOCK

When it comes to security, clubs that are open 24/7 have some particular challenges, as well as tips for other types of operations.

Anytime Fitness, the Hastings, Minnesota-based franchise, which operates a worldwide chain of nearly 3,000 fitness centers that are open 24 hours a day, is a prime example, since its clubs are unstaffed much of the time—an excellent reason for the company to zero in on security, says Mark Daly, Anytime's national media director. "Our philosophy is that nothing is more important than the safety and security of our members, so we built our clubs around that idea."

Because Anytime Fitness' business model means that the clubs can't rely on employees to screen entrants and secure the perimeter of its clubs, it must rely heavily on technology.

Typically, the clubs are staffed during the day and into the evening; after that, members can enter on their own using the key fob with built-in authentication they received when they signed up for a membership.

To ensure that members' extra guests—or criminals—are not getting in during unstaffed hours, Anytime Fitness uses a tailgating detection system, which triggers an alarm if more than one person enters at a time, Daly explains. This is used in combination with a usage-tracking system, so management can see which member's fob was used to enter, and with video surveillance, so they can see exactly what transpired. →



Security cameras monitor an Anytime Fitness facility

A Security Primer

The tailgating detection system uses a thermal imaging camera, which detects body heat, and software that paints a virtual line across the club's entrance, says Jake Westling, the vice president of security for Anytime Fitness.

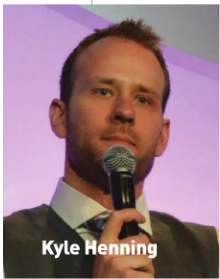
One person can cross that line without triggering an alarm, but, if another person crosses it without swiping their own fob, an alarm is triggered. "This is the fifth generation of our tailgating system, and it's improved with each version. This camera faces downward, and registers the heat coming from someone's head. Two people would have to have one body-heat signature to fool the camera, and that's nearly impossible," Westling says.

Members also tend to keep an eye on things, says Kyle Henning, who owns three Anytime Fitness franchises in Minnesota.

"When I first started as an owner, it was difficult to grasp the idea of leaving on Friday and not coming back until Monday," he says. "I used to check in on the weekends. However, over time, I've learned to rely on my members. If you're creating the right kind of friendly environment, people will watch out for the club, just like you do. If someone does let someone else into the club, another member will ask them to leave, and I'll have two voicemails about it from members before I have a chance to check the camera."

In addition, Anytime Fitness locations have 911 phones mounted on the wall, as well as wall-mounted security devices with a "panic button," and offer personal security devices to members, which can be worn around their neck or placed nearby when they're exercising.

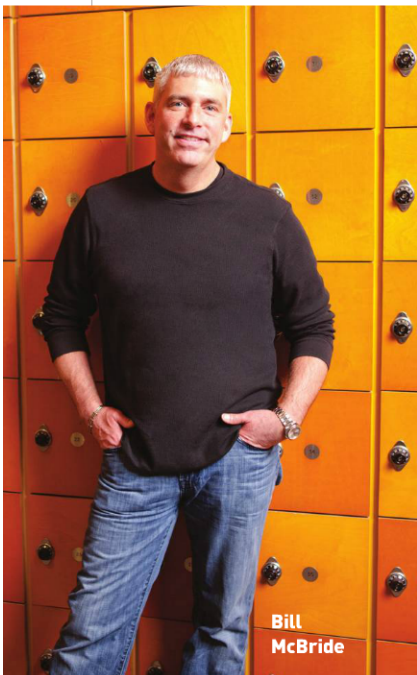
The clubs' panic buttons alert local authorities when pressed. Some members opt to purchase these devices, which will work in nearby parking lots, if they plan to use the facility in the middle of the night. However, Henning says, in his seven years of ownership, no one has *ever* pressed a panic button. To him, that means these security systems are working well.



Kyle Henning



Jake Westling with tailgating detection system



Bill
McBride

LOCKED UP

For clubs in general, locker rooms are one of the most tempting club areas for thieves, in large part because they can be difficult to secure. While some have enclosed areas that offer privacy, they can also make it easy for unscrupulous individuals to make off with your members' possessions.

One way to deal with this, as Anytime Fitness has done, is to create an alternative—small, private changing rooms, instead of traditional locker rooms. Members use these rooms to shower or change, but leave their belongings in open cubbies located in clear view of anyone in the area.

"We also encourage members not to bring valuables to the club, and we've found that people use common sense and keep an eye out for one another," Daly says.

This model works for Anytime Fitness clubs, which tend to be on the small side, but what about larger clubs, like those of ASC?

They rely on other methods to secure their locker rooms—e.g., posting signage in lockers reminding members to be careful, and having club management and staff conduct regular walk-throughs of the rooms. This can go a long way toward deterring thieves, McBride attests.



Mark
Daly

So, too, can making sure that your lockers and locks offer security. Traditional metal lockers with user-supplied padlocks may be the most secure option, but they're not always attractive or acceptable to members paying a premium for their dues.

locker room SECURITY

Please think carefully about bringing any valuables to the club as we have recently had lockers burglarized in the locker room.

- ▶ We have and continue to require all guests to show photo ID upon entering the club.
- ▶ We're posting this notice to make our members aware of the situation.
- ▶ We're increasing our walk-throughs of the club.
- ▶ We ask that you report any suspicious behavior you may witness immediately to club management.

Information | Service Desk

active
SPORTS CLUBS



parking lot SECURITY REMINDER

Please think carefully about bringing any valuables to the club as we have recently had cars burglarized in the parking lot.

- ▶ We've notified the police department immediately, and they have been to the club to investigate.
- ▶ We're posting this notice at the service desk and in the locker rooms to make our members aware of the situation.
- ▶ We ask that you report any suspicious behavior you may witness immediately to club management.

Information | Service Desk

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SPORTS CLUBS

ActiveSports reminds members about their role in maintaining security

The ASC locations offer lockers with several options, including digital locks, padlocks, or key locks, McBride explains. Whatever you do, supplying a satisfactory solution for your members is essential, insists McBride, even if that means offering padlocks for loan or sale.

EYE IN THE SKY

What about video surveillance? It has to be done in the right way, emphasizes McBride.

“Obviously, we’d never have cameras inside a locker room, but we can place them outside of it, so we know who entered, and, in case something occurs, when they entered or exited.”

At Anytime Fitness, video surveillance is essential, especially during the hours when the clubs aren’t staffed. All make use of open spaces, without any nooks or crannies that might not be visible to the system. “This is done by design, not just for the security aspect, but also to eliminate the possibility of someone in medical distress going unnoticed,” Daly says.

It’s this video surveillance system that truly makes Henning feel comfortable leaving his Anytime Fitness properties—especially because he can easily check in on them from his computer or smartphone. “At any time of day, I can see who’s in the club. I feel comfortable keeping an eye on things—so my members can feel comfortable, too.”

Finally, if, despite all of your efforts, you do have an incident at your club, what’s the best way to handle it?

“You want to make people aware of it, and to remind them about the security measures you have in place, but you don’t want to cause panic,” McBride advises. “When a situation occurs, either in our club or another nearby club, we always notify our members. We let them know that the police have been notified, and ask them to try to always maintain a heightened sense of awareness about anything unusual they might see. It’s just common sense.” —

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