



# Is Your Gym Built Strong?

Buying a fitness franchise is a serious exercise, so make sure yours is designed to succeed.

By Frank Deluca

**T**here's no business like the gymnasium business. Your customers may vary widely in age, background, income level, mobility and personal goals. The services you provide can be a customer's road to health or, if misused, a source of injury. The space in which you work is often large, with several distinct sections, including a free weight area, aerobics room, spinning room and locker rooms, plus the front desk and your own office space. This is a lot to keep track of as you begin your franchise journey, but fortunately, your franchisor will be there to help.

## Space

Franchisees are more likely to take over an existing gym location than open a newly built one. However, even existing locations can require renovations.

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These build-outs aren't your responsibility—by the time the franchisee is onboard and a contractor has been hired, the gym has already been designed. Nevertheless, there are a few requirements standard to all gyms, and you should find out if yours will meet them. If it does not, consult your franchisor immediately.

#### Ceilings

A gymnasium ceiling should be at least 3 m (10 ft) high, though some gyms get away with only 2.5 m (8 ft). A better height is about 3.5 m (11 to 12 ft), as it allows more room for machinery and gives patrons a sense of 'largeness' in their space.

#### Floorspace

Change rooms and shower facilities can account for at least 45 to 55 m<sup>2</sup> (500 to 600 sf) of your gym's total floorspace—many need 90 to 130 m<sup>2</sup> (1,000 to 1,400 sf). Treadmills and other large exercise machines can require as much as 3 m<sup>2</sup> (35 sf) each.

Based on these numbers alone, it is unlikely you'll be able to run a gym of less than 186 m<sup>2</sup> (2,000 sf). Even a 186-m<sup>2</sup> gym shouldn't be more than a studio, *i.e.* a space emphasizing floor exercises, such as yoga or aerobics, without any machines or shower facilities.

A space between 370 and 650 m<sup>2</sup> (4,000 and 7,000 sf) should accommodate everything needed for a full-service gym, *i.e.* studios, a workout space with machines, free weights and mats, as well as a change room with shower facilities.



#### Accessibility issues

Accessibility for the physically challenged is a major societal issue, even when it comes to fitness. If you wish your club to be 'barrier free,' you'll need to ensure all doorways are at least 914 mm (36 in.) wide and capable of being opened without pulling. If your gym has steps, it will also need a ramp.

Accessibility is especially important for your washroom. At least some of your sinks, toilets and shower facilities must

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Most franchisees take over existing gym locations, but even these can require renovations before re-opening.



accommodate those requiring crutches, walkers or wheelchairs. For example, an accessible toilet must be elongated, with an unencumbered radius of 1.7 m (5.57 ft) and bars in place to assist patrons as they raise and lower themselves. Your building inspector will not be flexible on these requirements. As standards vary by province, territory and municipality, it's important to consult with your franchisor to ensure you're meeting any government-mandated requirements.

#### Energy savings

Before you purchase a franchised gymnasium, consult a mechanical engineer. He or she should be qualified to evaluate the efficiency, capacity and longevity of the building's heating, ventilation and air-conditioning (HVAC) system. If your system is overtaxed for the size of your space, you could have some costly upgrades in your future.

As with any business, your most costly plumbing item will be your hot water source; since your gym will likely have shower facilities, you'll need a lot of hot water. Water can be heated either by electricity or gas. Heating your water with electricity is cheaper upfront, but may cost more over the long term. If your facility is able to use gas (meaning, it has access to a nearby source of gas and is properly vented), you should consider making this your primary heat source.

#### Fixtures

It's hard for you (or your contractor) to compromise when it comes to space. However, the choice between different lighting options, flooring materials, etc., may be yours alone. As with any business, the key is to strike a balance between quality, affordability and need.

#### Lighting

A gym's lighting can range from simple fluorescents to pot lights, track lighting or indirect lighting, *i.e.* a light source with no visible fixture. Your decision will be dictated largely by budget. Fluorescent lighting is most often used to illuminate gym space and not surprisingly, it is also the cheapest. Pot lights, track lighting and other fixture options can be much costlier.

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Remember: different parts of your gym will have different lighting needs. A free weight room, for example, should be extremely bright; it is best served by fluorescents. Spinning rooms, yoga studios and your own office space may be more appealing with softer light and will require dimmers.<sup>1</sup>

*Flooring*

Constant foot traffic, heavy equipment and falling weights put serious wear and tear on a gymnasium floor. This makes assessing flooring materials crucial, but also quite challenging, because not all parts of your floor have to withstand equal abuse.

Aesthetic value is important for a gym floor, but safety and durability matter more. A free weight room should have rubber floor coverings, partly to protect the floor in cases of a dropped barbell or dumbbell, and partly to help a weightlifter keep his or her footing. Spinning classes should have wooden floors to stabilize the bicycles. Common areas and change rooms should have ceramic, porcelain or marble flooring to guard against water damage.

The required structural integrity of your flooring is a matter for the contractor and building inspector to figure out. At minimum, the inspector will require a floor that can withstand 4,788 Pa (100 psf [pounds-per-square-foot]). This may not be a problem if your facility occupies the ground floor of a building with no basement—in that case, you'll be walking on concrete. However, if you're on the second floor, you may be walking on wood, which is not as strong.

*Walls*

A gym's walls are usually built of the same materials as those in any other commercial building. However, many gyms are also heavily mirrored, too. Your contractor needs to work with an experienced fabricator and installer to ensure mirrors are affixed firmly. Once this is done, ask your franchisor for advice on how close you can place your machines and free weights to the mirror.

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Constant foot traffic, heavy equipment and falling weights put serious wear and tear on a gymnasium floor.



*Fountains, hand sanitizers, paper towel dispensers, etc.* These fixtures can range from very expensive 'touchless' models to the typical hand-pumped or cranked variety to simply a paper towel roll and spray bottle. Any of these methods can provide the basics—it really comes down to how much you and your franchisor are prepared to spend for customer amenities. A typical water fountain can be bought for \$600, whereas a high-end, chilling model can cost \$3,000 or more.

#### *Washrooms, showers and locker rooms*

A gymnasium's sinks, showers, etc., are much like those found in the average home—the main difference is that a gym owner must maintain several of them at once. If your gym has, say, six to eight showers and toilets, a 25-mm (1-in.) water line may be sufficient; however, larger spaces will require at least 50 mm (2 in.). Beyond controlling the flow of water, your biggest concern will be preventing patrons from using too much.

The upfront cost of reducing water usage belies the long-term savings. Low-yield shower heads, low-flush toilets, sensor-activated taps and similar devices are always more expensive than regular fitted fixtures, but over time, they can save you money. There are also plumbing systems that will automatically mix hot water with cold, thus preventing anyone from overusing the hot water—this is another concept worth looking into.

#### It can all work out for you

Fitness-related or not, every franchise purchase should be approached with the same methodology: due diligence, critical assessment and a willingness to walk away from a bad deal. Yes, a gymnasium may be more complex than many business operations, but these rules still apply. Your franchisor, contractor and even third-party engineers will help ensure you, as franchisee, have all the expertise you need to make your business a real record breaker.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Make sure to inquire about automatic timers, as well. These devices can ensure every light that needs to be shut off at night will be. This is an easy way to reduce energy costs. **fe**



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