

Locker Rooms: Pluses & Minuses

CBI's experts describe what clubs are doing well ...
and what they could be doing better

By Julie King

Locker rooms. Are they necessary evils that require constant attention and maintenance ... or soothing oases that can refresh, relax, and rejuvenate your members?

The industry's foremost architects, suppliers, and health club operators believe that they're the latter. They understand that these common spaces present a valuable opportunity to elevate and enrich the member experience.

As competition among clubs heats up, locker rooms are attracting greater attention, because management realizes just how vital they are to membership sales and member satisfaction, and, thus, to their branding and competitive edge.

"Locker rooms have changed tremendously over the years," observes Leo Krashanoff, the sales manager of SAG North America, Inc., a locking systems manufacturer based in San Rafael, California. "Facility owners now recognize that excellence, with respect to their design and functionality, is one of the keys to member retention."

"Because they're an ideal spot to differentiate your facility, locker rooms should be more than just a place to secure your personal belongings," suggests Suzanne Lee, the marketing manager for

Digilock, a Petaluma, California-based manufacturer of electronic locks and security solutions. "This space, once regarded as utilitarian, has become an almost spa-like amenity."

Brent Darden, the CEO of Brent Darden Consulting, Inc., of Dallas, concurs. "It's important that operators understand the locker room really helps establish a club's level of quality for the consumer. Recently, I've noticed an increased attention to detail and elegance, and a distinct move towards luxury."

As more clubs, including high-volume/low-priced (HVL) facilities, upgrade their locker rooms, members are coming to expect something beyond simple cleanliness and utility. "The locker room is now considered more important than ever before. You can't skimp on it and remain competitive," warns Bruce Carter, the president of Optimal Design Systems International, a Weston, Florida-based design and consulting firm.

CBI spoke with a cross-section of industry experts—designers, consultants, and suppliers—who, each year, visit scores of locker rooms worldwide, and asked them what they'd recently noticed that clubs were doing really well ... as well as what, in some cases, they were doing wrong. The following is what they had to say. →



Leo Krashanoff



Suzanne Lee



Brent Darden



soothing space:
Vaverly Oaks Athletic Club



sophisticated simplicity: Premier
Health and Fitness Center

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Designed to impress

A marriage of form and function, the best locker rooms are designed not only to look great and feel comfortable, but also to be easy to use. "They should represent an escape from the gym," contends Carter, "and, when people first see them, you want them to say 'Wow!'"



Bruce Carter

Achieving that starts with a smart layout that provides unencumbered traffic flow, sufficient space, appropriate privacy, and strategically situated vital components, such as showers, toilets, and grooming areas.

Among the considerations is the entryway, where doors are often an impediment to frequent two-way traffic. Active Wellness, LLC, a health services management company based in Sausalito, California, stipulates that its facilities have wide locker room entrances, with a Z-shaped configuration, and corner guards that protect against scuffing from gym bags, explains President and CEO Bill McBride.



Bill McBride

In addition to protecting members' privacy, traffic flow should be simple—as it is, for instance, at the Waverly Oaks Athletic Club, in Waltham, Massachusetts, and at the Premier Health and Fitness Center in Tallahassee, Florida.

"In a well-designed locker room, way-finding should be intuitive and not require any directional signage," says Hervey Lavoie, the president of Ohlson Lavoie Collaborative, a planning and design firm with offices in Denver, Colorado.



Hervey Lavoie

Other possible design perks include natural light from clear-vision glass windows, and high cathedral ceilings that confer a feeling of spaciousness and openness. Private changing rooms are

quickly becoming a must-have. In fact, some smaller facilities, such as those of Orangetheory Fitness, are employing unisex locker rooms, with a common locker area and private changing rooms with toilets and showers, to save the space that separate, gender-specific layouts involve.

Equipped to delight

Today, the industry's exceptional locker rooms continue to raise the bar.

The Stone Creek Club & Spa, in Mandeville, Louisiana, for example, has replaced its shower curtains with shower doors. "It installed fantastic shower doors made of ribbed glass that makes an aesthetic statement and hides water streaks," notes

Darden. "It also has set a new standard of service by replacing the floor towel outside of each shower after every use."

Beautiful tiles and dramatic lighting in steam rooms, saunas, and whirlpool areas can provide an elegant aesthetic. Forma Gym, in Walnut Creek, California, dramatically distinguishes these wet areas with the creative use of colored LED lighting, along with giant wall tile, a cold towel caddy, and an accent wall.

With respect to lockers, Lavoie reports that he's seeing an innovative mix of horizontal with the usual narrow vertical boxes, thereby offering a choice of different shapes and sizes, both in terms of appearance and function. And some clubs, he reports, are eliminating corner lockers altogether. "This is designed to avoid having two dysfunctional lockers crammed in a corner that no one wants to use."

Lockers also have become more sophisticated, with smaller cell phone/wallet/key units located outside the main locker room; units that can recharge cell phones; and electronic locking systems that don't require batteries.

At the Rochester Athletic Club, in Rochester, Minnesota, an RFID (radio-frequency identification) system allows members to easily access lockers with the swipe of a card or wristband, and permits staff to view a dashboard indicating which lockers are currently being used.

"This system has an additional advantage—it delivers a real-time audit trail, enabling club personnel to instantly determine if members have left something in their lockers, and inform them before they leave the building," points out Gerhard Pichler, the North American sales director and business development manager for Gantner Technologies, GmbH. Based in Schruns, Austria, Gantner manufactures contactless NFC (near-field communication) access control, electronic locking, and cashless payment applications.



Gerhard Pichler

Amenities and grooming supplies also are being upgraded, in terms of the quality and range of products provided.

"Some clubs have come to see the shower and vanity areas as an opportunity to offer 'added value' to members and guests," says Benjamin Witham, a vice president at Petra-1, based in Concord, Ontario, Canada, a major provider of towels and locker room amenities. "Previously, these areas were regarded only as cost centers."

The list of possible upgrades is virtually endless, and includes touchless faucets and toilets, →



Benjamin Witham



Forma Gym's locker rooms are well-stocked...



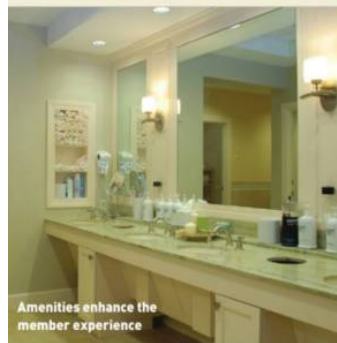
...with well-designed shower, sauna, and whirlpool areas



RFID wristbands access lockers at the Rochester Athletic Club



The Stone Creek Club & Spa's elegant glass shower doors



Amenities enhance the member experience



Cooper Fitness Center's women's locker room

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waterfall showerheads, hair dryers, swimsuit water extractors, accent and recessed ambient lighting, soft music, beverage stands, and newspapers. The Rev Cycle Studio, in Ardsley, New York, provides chilled and heated towels, and Peloton, in New York City, dispenses flip-flops near the showers.

Opportunities still exist

Although clubs have been working hard to deliver a better locker room experience, there's still room for improvement—in both small and larger facilities—CBI's experts conclude.

One common complaint they identify is a poor design, marked by a confusing layout, inadequate privacy, or lack of space.

"One mistake operators often make is placing too much emphasis on the size of the fitness center floor, forgetting that members often spend as much time in the locker room as they do working out," notes Frank Guengerich, the COO for WTS International, Inc., a Rockville, Maryland-based spa, wellness, and fitness center consultancy.

Carter's designers adhere to a "five-foot rule"—providing at least five feet of traffic-flow space so people don't brush up against each other.

Thoughtful layouts, adds Carter, include showers and toilets that don't open onto the locker area, but, rather, to minimize exposure, onto a private hallway.

"My biggest pet peeve is sinks positioned in the toilet area," contributes Bryan Dunkelberger, a principal at S3 Design, Inc., a Braintree, Massachusetts-based interior design firm. "Unlike in a public restroom, people in a club are shaving and grooming and spending more time in the locker room. Locating the sinks next to the toilet area can make for a less-than-pleasant experience."

Cramped locker areas with little changing space can only add to any personal frustrations members may be feeling, particularly during peak times. "Designers need to remember that each locker comes with a human being sitting in front of it, desperately struggling to put their socks on," counsels Lavoie.

Clubs that install complicated locking systems may face ongoing operating expenses or occasional outages, says Estera Kuhlmann, the executive vice president of Keyless Co., LLC, of Irving, Texas,

which manufactures keyless and battery-free lock products. "Members prefer simple locking solutions that don't require keys, padlocks, bracelets, or cards, and managers want systems they don't have to think about."

Consistent locker maintenance is also important. "Locker rooms provide both the first and last impressions of a club," reminds Pichler, "and, if many locks aren't working, it's a clear indication the club isn't concerned about quality, and doesn't care about the member experience."

The cleaner, the better

No aspect of the locker room can be taken for granted or left unattended—and that includes cleanliness, odors, fresh air, etc. The HVAC system is critical, and should provide adequate air exchange, with supply air coming into dry areas, and return air emanating from wet zones.

"The main locker room issue is smell," suggests McBride. For its facilities, Active Wellness stipulates 12 air exchanges per hour in dry areas, and 20 in wet locations. "Most poorly designed locker rooms have smell, mold, and mildew issues, which damages everything from lockers and locks, to toilet partitions, ceiling vents, tiles, and doors."

Cleanliness—or lack of it—plays a role in odors, and can significantly impair the locker room experience. "Proper staff training and the clear assignment of responsibilities are vitally important," posits Witham. "Locker rooms need to be well monitored, well organized, and well stocked with amenities, especially during peak periods."

Adds Lee: "During scheduled cleaning and restocking times, checking the hinges and locks on lockers, and conducting a quick sweep of the sauna and steam room can surface most issues before members notice them."

Even the *appearance* of cleanliness—a locker room must not only *be* clean, but *look* clean as well—can be hard to achieve when dealing with problematic materials. "White tile and white grout collect dirt, and, over time, look dirty, even if you bleach them nightly," says Dunkelberger. "In such cases, you're fighting an uphill battle with respect to appearance."

"While equipment, classes, and other amenities are very important, it's essential to remember that a club's locker rooms are the first and last place that most members visit," reminds Lee. "It's the place where you want them to refresh, relax, and rejuvenate." —

—Julie King, julie.king1@comcast.net

Is your locker room an inviting, relaxing "oasis" that members enjoy? Or is it often a messy, unpleasant area that members avoid? These IHRSA associate members can help you make the most of this important space, which can really enhance the member experience.

PRODUCT SHOWCASE

S3 DESIGN, INC.



S3 Design is an architectural firm that's dedicated its practice to the planning and design of health club facilities. The firm's "passion" is creating environments and user experiences that promote participation in fitness and wellness activities which encourage active, healthy lifestyles. The firm works with its clients to help them achieve their goals, developing facilities that support the success of their business models. Its proven methodology of delivering projects enables S3 Design to develop creative solutions that work for each client—uniquely.

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KEYLESS.CO, LLC



Keyless.Co locks deliver. They're easy to use, economical, and secure. They're also environmentally friendly, as they require no batteries or software. They're durable, as they have no plastic parts, and are water-resistant. They also come with 10,000 combination possibilities, they're anti-pick with a breakaway knob, and they're reprogrammable to alternate master keys. In addition, the Keyless H3 Hasp has an integrated anti-rotation system triggered by the presence of a padlock. With Keyless, there are no ongoing operating expenses, and they're backed by a five-year warranty. ADA-compliant options are available.

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