



Workouts Go Virtual

Pandemic restrictions hit gyms hard. But Upper Deck Fitness flexed its digital muscle and didn't miss a rep.

The weekend of March 14-15, 2020 is one Suzanne Palazzo will never forget. Like much of the nation, she was preoccupied by news of the still-nascent coronavirus threat, and how health authorities would respond. But as the Founder and CEO of Upper Deck Fitness in Stamford, CT, Palazzo could tell that no matter what specific restrictions were announced, her industry would get rocked.

"We're going to have to close the gyms," she told her training director. "It's our civic duty."

Palazzo quickly prepared all 45 classes a week, plus private training appointments, to move fully online. By noon that Monday, the state shut down all gyms. But while other facilities were scrambling, Upper Deck classes continued uninterrupted — just now on its VidyoConnect video platform.

"Overnight we switched our entire operation," says Palazzo. "It was so turnkey that on Tuesday March 17, there was no change in terms of our number of customers in classes. It was just all done virtually."

Although Palazzo didn't know it until that fateful weekend, Upper Deck Fitness had been training for two years for just this moment.

Conditioning for flexibility

Upper Deck first launched virtual fitness classes using the VidyoConnect video communication platform in 2018. For Palazzo, who started Upper Deck in 2015, delivering high-quality equipment-free workouts over two-way video enabled her to offer clients a hybrid model of in-person and virtual training, to keep up with workouts when travelling, and to reduce the intimidation factor of going to a gym. With Upper Deck's pay-as-you-go fee structure, video let Palazzo expand her business.

Fast forward to 2020, and Upper Deck's established video bona fides allowed it to completely restructure around virtual fitness. Within months, it had shuttered two of its three gyms for good and introduced new subscription pricing to replace pay-as-you-go fees.

"We never would have been able to do it without Vidyo and our prior experience," says Palazzo. "Our trainers and clients were familiar with it, and we were already speaking this language. Even if clients hadn't participated in virtual workouts yet, they knew we provided the option."

The result: Upper Deck kept its revenue stable through 2020, with a steady group of 250 regular clients and 15 trainers. *"In the pandemic, this is a win,"* says Palazzo. "We haven't stopped working. If anything, we've been working more. In our industry, most fitness trainers went without work for at least a couple of months. Our people never missed a day."



In our industry, most fitness trainers went without work for at least a couple of months. Our people never missed a day.

— Suzanne Palazzo
Founder and CEO Upper Deck Fitness

Sweating the details

With no clients in the gym itself, each Upper Deck virtual class is limited to about 15 with two trainers — one who leads the workout and another who coaches, watching the participants on screen to provide feedback and encouragement. Palazzo calls this “eyes on you” to differentiate it from other video-feed fitness classes. Participants hear the comments directed at others, just as with in-person classes, encouraging accountability.

“We mute everyone just to reduce background noise,” explains Palazzo, *“but there’s usually some chit-chat at the beginning of class, and people get to know one another. It’s very personable.”* That social element has been vital for her clients, she adds. *“In the midst of all of the unknown, their connection to their community and having an outlet for their well-being was never, ever interrupted.”*

Stretching for greater reach

In Palazzo’s eyes, 2020 was a turning point. *“The industry has been forever changed by the pandemic,”* she says. *“People have now formed a habit of working out at home. Gyms also got a bad rap as a place where germs spread, so it’s going to take a long time for the trust to return.”*

Upper Deck sees expansion opportunities in better virtual fitness experiences. *“The reason why we launched video fitness classes in 2018 was to significantly expand our customer reach,”* she says. *“We could be an international brand and, quite candidly, the overhead does not change much.”* Upper Deck already has clients in nine states, as word spread from clients to friends and family, and has plans to grow more by marketing beyond its local demographic. *“The potential for virtual fitness completely trumps anything that we would be able to do in a facility.”*

Her vision for video-based fitness and health coaching is expansive: cooking and healthy eating classes; guided meditation and stress management; and fitness classes that target groups like young athletes and people with specific health issues like hypertension or cardiac rehab. It’s all part of what she calls “prescribed fitness”.

“When Upper Deck launched back in 2015, my goal was to be more than just a gym,” says Palazzo. *“The fitness industry does not properly serve the people who need it the most. If what we offer is more accessible and cost effective for people to get started, then we can impact people’s lives and help them keep going. Ultimately, that’s what we’re all in this industry to do.”*

Powering Upper Deck’s fitness classes is reliable, high-quality video communication that can be integrated into everything they choose to tackle.

KEYS TO SUCCESS



Simple access — Static website links labeled “Virtual Studio” or “Private Training Room” open in one of five VidyoConnect account seats



Mobile integration — In 2020, Upper Deck launched a mobile app that clients use to directly open the correct VidyoConnect room



“Eyes on you” — With two-way video and two trainers in every class, participants are watched and coached, encouraging greater accountability



Social connection — Classes of about 15 people are scheduled at regular times, with some chatting at the start and end to simulate the group experience

ABOUT UPPER DECK FITNESS

Voted Best Fitness Club on the Gold Coast for 2020, Upper Deck is a full-service virtual gym with one flagship location in Stamford, CT. It specializes in custom programs based on one’s lifestyle, health history and goals, with live at-home workout classes that provide accountability and motivation. UpperDeckFitness.com



Vidyo, Inc.
Tel: 201.289.8597 | Toll-free: 866.998.4396
info@vidyo.com
www.vidyo.com