



Fitness industry expanding despite tough climate

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KUALA LUMPUR: The unfavourable economic climate has not hindered the fitness industry from pursuing expansion plans.

Industry players said this was in view of more people becoming health conscious and desiring a quality life.

Besides smaller locally-owned outfits, the industry has attracted foreign set-ups such as Fitness First, Celebrity Fitness and True Fitness, which are the top three major fitness clubs in the country.

Fitness First Malaysia managing director Shaun Measday, without divulging figures, said despite the economic slump, its net membership growth rate was still positive as people viewed physical fitness as a necessity.

He also attributed the growth to people becoming more cautious of increasing health hazards and strenuous work conditions.

Britain-based Fitness First, which has about 36,000 members in Malaysia, is on the lookout for locations to open new centres.

It has 12 clubs in Malaysia – 11 located in the Klang Valley and one in Penang.

"We have secured several locations for expansion of our club network but at this stage we are unable to disclose more information on new club openings.

"At Fitness First, one of our top concerns when choosing a new location for a club is convenience and accessibility," Measday said in an email interview with *StarBizWeek*.

Apart from consolidating its position in the marketplace, the fitness chain was upgrading two of its most popular and successful clubs at The Curve and Klang Bukit Tinggi, he said.

In December, these two clubs would be repositioned as Fitness First Malaysia's first two "Platinum" clubs offering upgraded facilities and a range of extra benefits for members.

Fitness First is currently the number one fitness chain in Malaysia and has over 550 centres in 18 countries with some 1.4 million



Choi KwangHo says Celebrity Fitness is on an aggressive expansion trail

members worldwide.

Measday said the chain's sponsorship of the upcoming *Biggest Loser Asia* reality television programme, which would be screened on Astro's Hallmark Channel later this year, would further propel Fitness First's business.

The programme will see 30 overweight contestants competing in teams for the chance to win US\$200,000 by transforming their bodies.

"We see this programme as an incredible platform for us to not only promote the virtues of a healthy lifestyle, but also to link our brand to the potential for anyone to change their own lives through exercise," Measday added.

Celebrity Fitness Malaysia managing director Choi KwangHo said the chain was on an aggressive expansion trail.

Apart from opening new clubs, it was open to acquiring smaller fitness centres in view of

the potential of the fitness market in the country, he noted.

"Before acquiring other fitness clubs, we will study carefully the viability of their business plans and the location of these clubs. We are the only fitness club that has fitness centres in shopping malls.

"This is part of our strategy to boost business as our members can work out, dine and catch a movie all in one place," he added.

Recently, Celebrity Fitness acquired California Fitness and now has eight clubs, seven of which are in the Klang Valley and one in Penang.

It will be opening another three – one by year-end and the other two by the second quarter of next year.

Choi said it had not identified the location for the first new outlet but the second and third would be in Kepong and Mont Kiara.

According to him, the fitness operator had



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FITNESS FIRST MALAYSIA MD SHAUN MAESDAY

changed its approach this year to be more customer focused and ensure customer satisfaction rather than merely bank on large-scale operations.

Measures included responding promptly to customers' needs and encouraging members to communicate freely with the management so as to resolve any specific issues.

US-based Celebrity Fitness, which started operation in Malaysia in 2004, is the second largest fitness operator in the country with between 45,000 and 50,000 members.

It is expecting double digit increase in sales for its Malaysian operations by year-end. On a global basis, it is targeting to have a total of 52 clubs worldwide by 2012.

Meanwhile, Singapore-based True Fitness started operations in Malaysia in May 2005 and now has four clubs.