

## CAUSES OF CUSTOMER DROPOUTS IN FITNESS AND WELLNESS CENTRES: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of this study was to identify which factors have an influence on customer dropouts in fitness and wellness centres in Spain based on the opinion of the agents involved in their management (managers, employees and customers). For that purpose, an interview was designed for each of the key agents to analyse aspects related to the economic situation of the sports centres, their experience, satisfaction and dropout management strategies. A total of 111 interviews were conducted in 37 sports centres (37 managers, 37 employees and 37 customers). The results show the necessity of implementing management strategies oriented towards clients to prevent their dropout. Strategies to build customers' loyalty focused on providing individual services and creating emotional links are essential to prevent high rates of customer dropouts, which will result in a competitive advantage.*

**Keywords:** Customer; Employee; Fitness centres; Manager; Satisfaction.

### INTRODUCTION

The level of sports practice of the population has increased and evolved on a global scale, becoming a healthy lifestyle habit in people's leisure time in western society (Teva-Villén *et al.*, 2014). Over recent years, sports mentality has been orientated more towards a non-regulated sport, focused more on health and leisure, leaving to one side the competition aspect of sport (Reverter & Barbany, 2007).

Associated with this change in mentality, nowadays, sport practice is taken up with wellness, comfort or aesthetic reasons as the main objectives (Reverter & Barbany, 2007). This fact has led to the need to create new and different typologies of fitness and wellness centres, with low-cost (<23 €/month), medium (24–50 €/month) and premium (>50 €/month) centres coming into being, as a function of the classification proposals of previous authors (IHRSA, 2013; Valgo, 2015) in order to meet the new mandates of more demanding customers each day (Pinillos, 2004).

Due to the wide variety of fitness and wellness centres that exists, the high level of competition and the decrease of customer numbers in Spain (IHRSA, 2011; IHRSA, 2013), management of these places is a primordial and distinguishing element that needs to be taken into account. In fact, it has been seen that it influences the customers in a direct manner (Bodet, 2008; Martínez & Martínez, 2009a; García *et al.*, 2012). This means that most fitness and wellness centres have in their management policies customer loyalty processes, which influence the quality, repurchasing and

comprehensive management offered (Bodet, 2008; Javadein *et al.*, 2008; Bedford, 2009; Joško *et al.*, 2009; Ferrand *et al.*, 2010).

Over the last few years, literature has been focused on analysing how fitness and wellness centres have directed their management policies towards the views and satisfaction of directors/managers (Sáez, 2008; Barranco *et al.*, 2015), employees/internal customers (Huddleston *et al.*, 2012; Boned *et al.*, 2013), and users/external customers (Martínez & Martínez, 2009a; Teva-Villén *et al.*, 2014; Theodorakis *et al.*, 2014; Calabuig-Moreno *et al.*, 2015), in search of total quality and maximisation of profits (Martínez & Martínez, 2009b; Elasri *et al.*, 2013; Jasinskis *et al.*, 2013). In this manner, good management and management policy planning are necessary to guarantee the centres' success (Barranco *et al.*, 2015). Thus, the figure of an adequately trained manager, who programmes and plans management processes as effectively and efficiently as possible, together with the services offered, and who also have the ability to adjust to the market requirements that are in constant change and evolution is required (Sáez, 2008).

On the other hand, the employee is decisive in achieving total quality of the sports centre (Bedford, 2009; Huddleston *et al.*, 2012; Boned *et al.*, 2013). Every interaction that an employee has with a customer can have direct repercussions, with a 20% increment in the possibilities of the customer continuing the following month at the centre. Increasing these interactions by up to two or three times a month will raise this increment to 50%. Increasing interaction with the customer four times a month can increase this percentage to 80% (Bedford, 2009). In this way, the satisfaction and motivation of the internal customer will affect customer retention in a positive manner and consequently, also the success of the organisation (Amah, 2009; Koustelios, 2009).

Another factor that has evolved in a substantial way, as a consequence of fitness and wellness centre management, are the users. Users are continually looking for better quality services, based on direct contact and proactive personnel who offer support, assessment and take their opinions into account (Bedford, 2009; Martin & O'Neill, 2010). These are the main assets of any organisation, but traditionally they have not been considered as important and this has been the reason that fitness centres have had a high number of customer dropouts (Avourdiadou & Theodorakis, 2014). Therefore, involving the customer in dropout management, and finding out what the motives for a customer are to abandon their centre, is fundamental to improving the dropout rate and to achieve better customer loyalty (Martínez & Martínez, 2009b; Teva-Villén *et al.*, 2014).

## **PURPOSE OF RESEARCH**

For the above reason, the aim of this research was to identify which factors influence customer dropouts from fitness and wellness centres in Spain through the opinions of the agents involved in their management (manager; employee and customer).

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

The sample was represented by 111 key agents of 37 fitness and wellness centres in Spain (37 managers:  $M=41.24\pm 4.38$  years of age;  $6.31\pm 3.75$  years of experience in the job; 37 employees:  $M=29.67\pm 5.82$  years of age;  $5.14\pm 3.62$  years of experience in the job; 37 customers:  $M=36.27\pm 5.53$

years of age;  $4.17 \pm 1.06$  years at the centre). The managers and employees of the facilities must have had a minimum experience of five years in the position they work in. The only participation requirement for customer for the study was that they were active customers of the centre.

For the sample, it was necessary to include low-cost ( $n=15$  centres), medium ( $n=17$ ) and premium ( $n=15$ ) centres. The location of the centres included: Andalucía ( $n=3$ ); Aragón ( $n=2$ ); Baleares ( $n=1$ ); Canarias ( $n=1$ ); Castilla-La Mancha ( $n=1$ ); Castilla y León ( $n=2$ ); Cataluña ( $n=1$ ); Galicia ( $n=2$ ); Madrid ( $n=16$ ); Murcia ( $n=2$ ); Navarra ( $n=1$ ); País Vasco ( $n=1$ ); Valencia ( $n=4$ ).

### **Instrument**

This research was conducted using a qualitative, descriptive-transversal method, through semi-structured interviews *in situ*. Firstly, after the literature review, a series of questions were drawn up on aspects that could affect users dropping out of a fitness and wellness centre (the manager interviews were conducted initially with 13 items; the employees with 13 items; and the customers with 12 items). Next step for the research team was to filter the questions, representing the four dimensions that the different questions were classified into: economical, sports centre, experience at the sports centre (to find out how the centre functions thoroughly and to explain which possible factors have failed or are failing) and the management of dropouts.

This was followed by assembling a group of experts, composed of six professionals in the field of sports facility management (five men, one woman). The group of experts consisted of four professors with PhDs from different Spanish universities and two directors of fitness and wellness centres, who were also directors of different national and international institutions in the field. The participating experts were required to have had a minimum of 10 years of experience in their field and their participation in the study was voluntary and impartial. Prior to the meetings, they were given an interview guide to analyse. Also, they were informed that all the sessions were recorded and handled with total confidentiality for post analysis. Once the results of the expert group were obtained, the redesigning and restructuring of the interviews was done. Finally, a pilot test was conducted at a fitness centre, with the aim of reviewing the final document, checking the orientation of the answers and also as training practice for the interviewers in the process of data collection. The final data collection document consisted of 15 items divided into four sections for managers; 15 items and four sections for employees and 13 items and four sections for customers.

### **Process and ethical approval**

Before the interviews were conducted, every participating centre was contacted by telephone to arrange a meeting with the agents concerned in the research. Prior to the interview, the participants were informed that they would be recorded but that their anonymity would be respected at all times. The average duration of all the interviews was  $14'29'' \pm 2'11''$  (managers:  $16'57'' \pm 6'25''$ ; employees:  $13'45'' \pm 4'14''$ ; and customers:  $12'47'' \pm 4'37''$ ). All the interviews were carried out *in situ* at the centres that included in the study. Finally, the participation in the study was strictly voluntary. The participants were informed about the aim of the study and that their answer would be anonymous, signing an informed consent previous to the study. In the same way, the protocol was approved by the ethics committee according to the last version of the Helsinki Declaration.

### Data analysis

Once all the data were collected, the interviews were transcribed using the Dragon Naturally Speaking v.12 (Nuance Communications®, MA, USA). Following this, a researcher categorised the interviews using Atlas.Ti v.6.0 (Scientific Software Development GmbH, Berlin, Germany) establishing the most relevant codes and comments.

**Table 1. STRUCTURE OF RESPONSES FOR CATEGORIES IDENTIFIED**

Variable	Codes
Economic	VAT Fee types Economic competence User competence Centre enrolment
Sport Centre	Employees' skills Attracting new customers Complaints-suggestions Equipment renovation Class renovation Key aspects of centre Key aspects of customers Results information
Experience at sport centre	Services offered Support service Employee motivation Customer motivation Satisfaction tools Adaptation to demand Distinguishing factors of centre Customer satisfaction Aim achievement
Drop out management	Reasons for drop out Drop out process Strategies to avoid drop outs Centre conduct

Table 1 shows the variables and codes derived from the codification process of all the interviews. For each code, emerging topics were also generated from which the main results were obtained. After the analysis, reports were compiled for obtained results. Finally, all the information was organised into diagrams, which would contribute to an understanding of the results, following the processes conducted in previous qualitative research (Felipe *et al.*, 2013).

## RESULTS

The results are divided into sections. In all of the cases, the analysis starts with a diagram where the codes and emerging topics are shown. Also, in both the diagram and in the text, comments were extracted from the interviews as illustration.

### Economic

Figure 1 shows the relation of the codes generated after the analysis with the key codes (keywords that appear frequently during each code analysis and that explain, in a conceptual manner, their influence in the study) and examples of comments illustrate the code.

FAMILY	CODES	KEY CODES	RESPONSES
ECONOMIC	VAT	Assimilation by the centre Fee rise Less revenues and customers	'The VAT increase caused a reduction of customers and it also had an effect on costs, since it had an effect on almost a 100% of the customers.'
	Fee types	Economic Custom	'Customers want a lower monthly fee, but they also want a more customised service.'
	Economic competence	Low-Cost Sector polarisation	'The Low-cost and they opt for much lower prices and obviously offering other kinds of products.'
	User competence	More demanding Quality More offers	'Customers are now much more informed and much more advised, so they do know much more now and they compete more because of the price.'
	Centre enrolment	Proximity Professionalism Flexible hours	'I was looking for the one as close as possible to my house and it is also one of the cheapest in my area.'

**Figure 1. STRUCTURE OF ECONOMIC SECTION: RELATION BETWEEN FAMILIES, CODES AND KEY CODES**

All of the managers reported that the increase in VAT had had a negative influence. The centres that absorbed the rise (those who did not modify the price of their services) had a decrease in turnover, while those centres that raised the price according to the VAT, saw a decrease in customer subscription. The users also named as determining factors in their day-to-day expenditure, the increase in fees and their need for personalised treatment from the employees: *The most important factor is the price. I have two children and I have to look out for the family's economy* (Customer 5). At the same time, they highlight that the competition between centres is positive for the reduction of monthly fees, but generates a polarisation of the market, creating a tendency towards the closure of medium-cost centres, benefitting the premium- and low-cost centres.

### Sport centre

The most relevant results regarding the sports centre are reflected in Figure 2, where the proximity of the centre to home and the existence of a personalised service are the main reasons indicated by the

customers for registering at a centre: *A personalised service is the first factor or at least the one I took into account most when joining initially* (Customer 17).

FAMILY	CODE	KEY CODES	RESPONSES
SPORT CENTRE	Employees' skills	Customer Service Empathy Proactive	'Instructors should know how to empathise with clients and have the willingness to deal with them and always pay attention to them.'
	Attracting new customers	Visits Database	'The girls at the reception desk ask them about their needs and when they can come, to help them according to the needs they have.'
	Complaints-Suggestions	Suggestions mailbox Email Personally	'Actually, there is a mailbox for suggestions and complaints, and the director of the centre answers to them personally.'
	Equipment renovation	Wear Economic Innovation	'Depending on the use, the state and whether we can afford it or not, we cannot think about any other possibility economically viable.'
	Class renovation	Classes influx Innovation Customers' demands	'According to three variables: customers' suggestions, our own technicians' suggestions and statistics of people who go to class.'
	Key aspects of the centre	Customer service Collective classes Staff of the centre	'Currently, what they value most about the club are the facilities, cleanliness, the classes and the instructors of the collective classes.'
	Key aspects of the customers	Customised Hygiene	'Personally, I think that the centre really cares about customers' satisfaction, the fact of having a customised service.'
	Results information	Personally Evaluations Email	'Personally, the instructor in charge of their routines is the one who asks them, giving feedback to each other about how it is going with the routine.'

**Figure 2. STRUCTURE OF SPORTS CENTRE: RELATION BETWEEN FAMILIES, CODES AND KEY CODES**

Complaints and suggestions are fundamental for all managers, and their management is essential for continuous improving of the centre. They must be attended to and entirely resolved, either in a personal manner or by means of a telephone call to the customer. When talking about the strong points of the centre, the customers highlight the personal treatment. On the other hand, the aspects that are not taken into account as much by the management are the deals offered to the users, both in terms of price and new services. *'They could lower the fees, as that way people would be happier. It's strange that in a situation like the one nowadays, they no longer take that into account'* (Customer 18).

### Experiences at the sports centre

Many of the customers do not differentiate any distinguishing factor between their centre and the competition. *'There is nothing about which you can say "my centre has it and there are not any others that do", therefore, I do not think that there is anything different or unique about my centre'* (Customer 27). However, if they pointed out any positive aspects of the centre, it would be the relation between quality and price or the treatment by and quality of the employees (Figure 3 on the following page). Another key aspect in the results is the measure of user satisfaction. Most managers confirm that they do not have standardised protocols for measuring customer satisfaction *'We do not really have any tools to measure satisfaction. We see it from day to day'* (Manager 2).

### Dropout management

Moving house was identified as the main reason for dropping out from the three implicated agents (Figure 4).

FAMILY	CODE	KEY CODES	RESPONSES
<b>DROP OUT MANAGEMENT</b>	Reasons to drop out	Move from residence/job Economic Health	'Right now, moving from residence is the only thing that comes to mind, it will probably be the only reason.'
	Drop out process	It would be valued It would be processed	'I guess I would listen to them, although I think that a client needs to be taken care of while s/he is in and not when s/he is out.'
	Strategies to avoid drop outs	Offers Empathise Customise drop outs	'The attitude of the workers towards these situations would be especially the one of keeping empathy, because it also depends on the situation of each client.'
	Centre conduct	Questionnaire Web/Mail In person	'We sit with them, we have a form to fill out with the partner so that the reasons for dropping out provides us with information.'

**Figure 4. STRUCTURE OF DROP OUT MANAGEMENT: RELATION BETWEEN FAMILIES, CODES AND KEY CODES**

FAMILY	CODE	KEY CODES	RESPONSES
<b>EXPERIENCE AT THE SPORT CENTRE</b>	Services offered	Collective classes Facilities Customer service	'Well, targeted level service activities are where customers find more satisfaction.'
	Support service	Loyalty Satisfaction More quality	'It has an effect on partners' satisfaction that makes them not go to other centres to meet the needs that may arise.'
	Employee motivation	Improvements in the contract Active participation Incentives	'Taking vision and action and giving rights and opportunities to all workers to continue promoting.'
	Customer motivation	Professionalism Empathise	'Especially customer services, the point that a client doesn't leave the facilities without talking with two or three members of the staff.'
	Satisfaction tools	Satisfaction survey Rating services NPS	'Yes, I don't know if they have done so yet, but we have sent them surveys to their email accounts at random.'
	Adaptation to demand	Suggestions forms Focus Group Demand analysis	'An analysis of what they seek is carried out, whether it is a real or an unusual demand, and then, a cost-benefit analysis is carried out as well.'
	Distinguishing factors of the centre	Quality/Price Staff of the centre Range of services	'Years of experience and professionalism. None has the professionalism and targeted activities this centre has.'
	Customer satisfaction	Innovation Proactive staff Customers' feedback	'They take into account the propositions we, as users of the gym, might suggest or at least that is my experience.'
	Aim achievement	Motivating Staff of the centre Customised	'Having an instructor in the room, being able to ask him/her questions that cannot be asked in other centres and they guide us to reach our aims.'

**Figure 3. STRUCTURE OF EXPERIENCE AT CENTRE: RELATION BETWEEN FAMILIES, CODES AND KEY CODES**



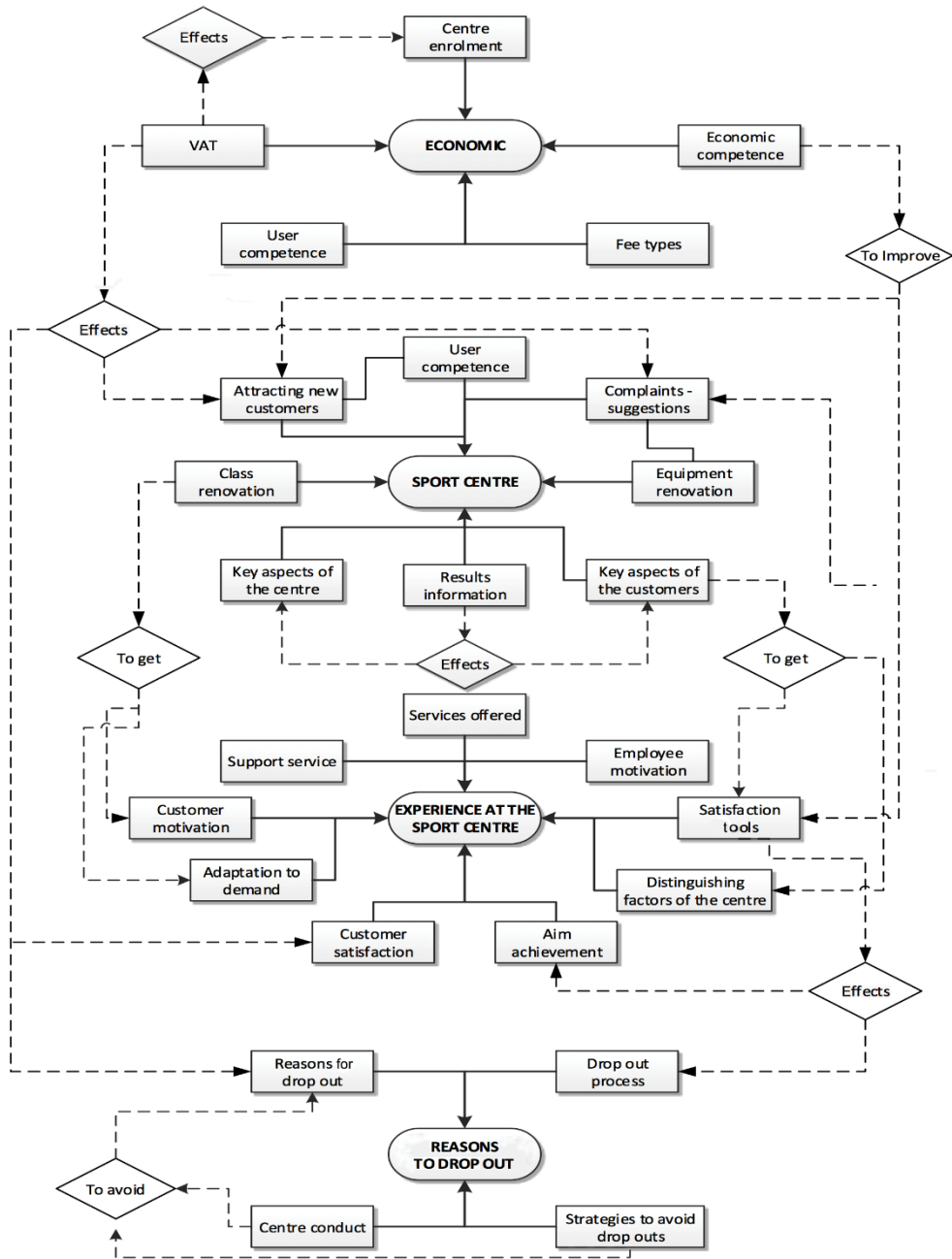


Figure 5. INTER-DIMENSIONAL STRUCTURE: RELATION BETWEEN CODES AND FAMILIES

The managers and employees also highlighted economic reasons or lack of motivation as motives. *'Members at the end of the day in times of crisis, instead of running on a running machine, they will run outside'* (Employee 22). The users, on the other hand, say that in many cases dropout is due to the absence of quality provision at the centre. Finally, Figure 5 shows the relation and influence that the remaining different codes have between them.

## DISCUSSION

The main aim of this study was to identify which factors influenced customer dropout from fitness and wellness centres in Spain, through the opinions of the implicated agents of the centres. The results contribute to the discussion of this problem and provide information on improving the management of sports centres in the fitness sector.

The increase in VAT negatively affected the management and transformation of centres in the fitness sector, which is an opinion that confirms the findings of previous studies (FNEID, 2013). This fact has been related to the loss of 60% of customers from the centres and an 11.9% decrease in fees during the first year of the introduction of the VAT increase, to the loss of 12,500 jobs and a 16.5% decrease in global employment by this sector (FNEID, 2013). Regarding the price competition between the centres, there is a tendency towards a polarisation of the market and a higher demand from customers, linked to a decrease of medium gyms from 60% to 52% and an increase of low-cost gyms from 14% to 27% over recent years (Algar, 2014; Valgo, 2015).

Regarding the sports centre, customers enrolled at the centres due to the proximity to their homes or work, a flexible timetable and the personalised service. Much of this is linked to the construction of new low-cost centres, whose main aims are closeness with the customer and flexible timetables (IHRS, 2009; Valgo, 2015). In accordance with personnel feedback of the centre on obtaining results from their customers, it was clear that there is controversy among them. The employees are the ones who affirm and report that they achieve their results through direct contact or evaluations, however, for the customers this same feedback is scarce or non-existent. For this reason, it is essential that the evaluation and feedback about the achievement of results with the customer at the centre is a key element of the management process (Brady & Cronin, 2001; Ko & Pastore, 2005). The centres must be aware of this discrepancy and take urgent measures to resolve it, as it directly affects customer loyalty and therefore the reduction of the number of dropouts (Bedford, 2009).

On the other hand, managers perceived the management process of complaints and suggestions as being very positive, believing they are perfectly attended to and resolved in a personal manner or by means of a telephone call. A lot of the customers have knowledge of the existence of a complaints and suggestions post box, however, they could not explain the process of their use and therefore are not conscious of how to use them. This problem must be resolved, providing easy and specifically clear complaint channels, as 65–90% of customers do not make a formal complaint because they have no knowledge of the procedure. Also, this type of customer is usually the most dissatisfied with the centre, and frequently expresses their unhappiness (Denton, 1991).

Likewise, the aspects that centres look at most and that are perceived as important issues by customers are the hygiene of facilities and personalised treatment. These factors have been related to improvements in satisfaction and therefore in the loyalty of the customers at the sports centre (Elasri *et al.*, 2013).

Customers manifested unanimously that their centre does not present any distinguishing factor regarding the competition. For this reason, there is a need of valuing and working on differentiating between centres. Managers confirm that they do not have tools for measuring their customers' satisfaction, an element that is necessary for achieving success in loyalty programmes (Bodet, 2008; Javadein *et al.*, 2008; Pedragosa & Correia, 2009; Elasri *et al.*, 2013; Theodorakis *et al.*, 2014). An interesting solution is the use of customer loyalty programmes in centres. These programmes increase customer retention ratios and intensify their relationship with the facility through what is known as a 'sense of belonging' (Lewis, 2004), given that it has been shown that it individualises the product (Uncles *et al.*, 2003). In this manner, this increases the value perceived at the centre, and consequently, customer satisfaction (Daryanto *et al.*, 2010), which contributes to a distinguishing element in terms of competition (Keh & Lee, 2006). In this manner, the sensation of 'feeling good' is boosted, thereby strengthening the motivation for attaining or accomplishing proposed aims (Cesario *et al.*, 2004).

The main motives that caused fitness and wellness centre dropouts are moving house/work and a decrease in the quality of the centre, which also reflects the findings of previous studies (Bara & Garcia, 2008; Macarro *et al.*, 2010; Nuvala *et al.*, 2013; Teva-Villén *et al.*, 2014). The following motives are the most repeated and are related to personal well-being and to facility aspects, such as care, maintenance and hygiene. This finding was noteworthy as it totally contradicts the beliefs of managers and personnel, who think that the main factor for customer dropouts is economical. Finally, regarding dropout management, contrary to the centres' beliefs, customers generally do not know what protocol to follow. In almost all of the facilities, customers would reconsider their decision to dropout if an offer was made to them or more attention was given to them by the centre.

## CONCLUSION

Ultimately, this study provides useful information for reducing customer dropout in fitness and wellness centres, this being one of their main problems. Retaining customers is five times harder than enlisting new ones (Kamakura *et al.*, 2003) and it has been calculated that a 5% decrease in customers' fees can have between 25% and 125% effect in terms of benefits (O'Brien & Sattler, 2003). Therefore, maintaining a robust customer portfolio is the main asset and source of income for the organisation (Hurley, 2004; Bodet, 2008;).

The results obtained provide incentives that could be used for retaining customers, like the proposals by Berry and Parasuraman (1991), based on economic incentives (discount in fees for the oldest members) or social incentives (improving customer-employee relationship). Also, it is necessary to take into account the fact that customers move away from their homes which is no reflection of the centre. The centre must include ways for customers to access any new information easily, like complaints, suggestions or any other type of customer contribution. The analysis revealed that the main reasons for customer dropout is moving house

and that the centre must work towards all of the elements that surround the customer. Management policies must be specific in search of a loyal customer, promoting affective customer-sports centre bonds. Customers demand more participation in the centres' decision-making implying that the managers should take this into consideration. Management aims must move in this direction, informing the employees of its importance, involving them in this process and promoting the use of diverse ways to handle complaints and suggestions.

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