

The gym as a healthy economic model

As community centres compete with commercial health clubs, JIM STANFORD says sweat equity goes better with vision

By JIM STANFORD

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It's New Year's resolution time. So this week, thousands of Canadians will join health and fitness clubs, hoping that a combination of high-tech gadgetry and old-fashioned peer pressure will help them shed those extra pounds.

To double my own chances of following through on my annual weight-loss resolution, I belong to two fitness clubs. One is the West End YMCA, not far from my Toronto home. The other is a branch of a major U.S.-based chain, near my office.

I can't claim that the extra expenditure on my part has had any dramatic impact on my waistline. But it has allowed me to conduct a totally unscientific experiment, comparing the performance of a commercial and a non-commercial club. And it's no contest: The 'Y' wins.

My commercial club exists because its owners want to make a profit. The Y exists because its founders wanted to improve community life. This fundamental difference in motivation trickles down to the sweaty details of my experience at both locations -- and in so doing speaks volumes about the evolution of society. Because Canada looks more like a commercial gym, and less like the Y, each passing year.

Even by narrow business criteria -- cost and quality -- the Y comes first. My Y membership costs a bit less. And in my experience, the facility is cleaner and more pleasant. (The other club is quite adequate, of course, or I wouldn't renew.) But it's a more striking contrast in the overall zeitgeist of the two locations that explains my real passion for the Y's treadmills. The commercial club exists to make money -- and they never let us forget it. Advertising for product sales, add-on services, membership deals, and high-protein milkshakes fill every available space. Radio ads are piped into the locker rooms (with soundtracks produced at head office). Life-size banners of rippling bodies urge me to hire a personal trainer to meet my fitness goals (as if that huge billboard for Calvin Klein underwear on the drive to work that morning didn't leave me feeling inadequate enough).

Most offensive of all was a campaign during the U.S. presidential election (another bright idea from head office), urging me to "make the right choice" and renew my membership. If I don't actually get to vote against George W. Bush, then I shouldn't have to confront red-white-and-blue election paraphernalia when I enter my own fitness club in Canada.

At the Y, on the other hand, there is virtually no advertising at all. A few posters urge patrons to nominate people for the Y's annual community peace award, and to care about the Third World.

There's a little sandwich bar, but no overpriced milkshakes. Kids tear around all over the place, many attending the Y's non-profit daycare. The Y even offers a limited number of highly subsidized memberships to low-income neighbours, in the interests of building "stronger families and stronger communities."

The Y's not free, of course: I pay my dues every month. But once I get there, I don't have the feeling that someone is constantly trying to part me from my wallet. And that's precisely why I find the Y so relaxing: It's a rare modern example of a non-commercial space. These days it's hard to even imagine ways to spend time that do not involve expending incremental cash. Going to the Y is one of them; going to the park with my daughters is another. That about exhausts the possibilities. And this is where my fitness regimen becomes an analogy for the bigger economic picture.

This year, private profit-seeking businesses (like my other fitness club) will account for 85 per cent of Canada's GDP. That's the highest in our history; Canada is now more commercialized and profit-driven than ever. Tax cuts and spending restraint have caused a gradual erosion of our public sector. Meanwhile, scrappy non-profits like the Y fight to retain their small slice of the overall pie. In the background, there's a gradual but pervasive cultural shift, whereby we all come to take commercialism for granted -- not just the omnipresence of the ads, but more importantly, the idea that the only reason to do something is for the money.

I drive past 183 billboards going to work every day (I counted them). Do they add any value to life? Some actually endanger life (like the live-action video signs that are proven to cause traffic accidents). Canadians spend \$25-billion a year on advertising. Advertising adds more to the cost of many products than provincial sales taxes and the GST combined. But I think the cultural and political implications are worse than the financial ones.

The disciples of Adam Smith celebrate the dominance of commercialism in our lives; for them, unbridled greed represents the pinnacle of economic rationality. The excellence of the Y, and the utter annoying uselessness of telephone soliciting, are proof positive that they're wrong. Some profit-seeking commercial businesses do improve people's lives. Many do not. And many non-profit enterprises are better at advancing the ultimate economic goal: doing something useful for real people.

Why aren't there more places like the Y? After all, in many cases they quite capably compete in a free market. This, too, reflects the cultural dominance of commercialism: People with talent and passion tend to go into private business these days, not into public or community service. How do we turn that around? I'll need to think about that one in the steam room at the Y.

Jim Stanford is an economist with the Canadian Auto Workers. He is not actually overweight. Really.