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Fitpass: toward democratizing fitness

Anupama Prashar and Leena Ajit Kaushal wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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Our vision is to make fitness and everything related to it easily accessible and affordable to the Indian consumer.

Arushi Verma, Co-Founder and Director, FITPASS

It was a pleasant, sunny afternoon in July 2017 in New Delhi. However, the atmosphere at the headquarters of Fitpass Business Ventures Pvt. Ltd. (Fitpass) was tense. The company founders and the creators of FITPASS—a mobile application (app) and web platform that provided users with a universal pass to gyms and fitness studios—had called an emergency meeting. Arushi Verma and Akshay Verma had heard that yet another of their competitors was closing.

Achieving unit economies was becoming arduous for companies in the online fitness market in India. Investments in this area had initially been driven by a high market potential and low market penetration. The sector had seen 16–18 per cent annual growth and had reached US$1.18 billion[[1]](#footnote-1) by 2017, while market penetration was just 0.5 per cent. Nevertheless, not all investments in the field had been successful. Unlike other online fitness start-ups that had phased out within a few months of starting up, Fitpass had weathered the storm. In fact, it stood tall among the few operating in the Delhi–National Capital Region (NCR)[[2]](#footnote-2) to organize the fragmented fitness industry in India. Delhi-NCR was a strategic region for the company since the per capita income of its population—almost three times that of the rest of India—had grown at the rate of 10.76 per cent against a national average of 10.2 per cent in fiscal year (FY) 2016–17.[[3]](#footnote-3)

While the online marketplace was crowded with look-alikes, the company had so far continued to innovate and to ensure its long-term growth and sustainability. Until recently, the Verma siblings had shown a clear understanding of the market dynamics and dominant issues that had prevented the growth of the Indian fitness market even as urban Indian populations had grown more fitness conscious. Some of the prominent issues were the annual membership fee structure, poor accessibility of fitness establishments, fixed workout schedules, long-term contracts, and a lack of standardized fitness services. The brother–sister duo, entrepreneurs and fitness enthusiasts, had strategically used technology to overcome inefficiencies in the fitness market, creating the FITPASS app to satisfy the unmet market need of fitness-conscious Indian youth for flexible workout options at affordable prices.

Since FITPASS’s launch in January 2015, the app had been downloaded more than 100,000 times, and the company had amassed 60,000 registered users and created a partner network of over 1,500 fitness establishments within the Delhi-NCR region. It was among the leading online fitness platforms in the region, generating 100 percent growth in month-on-month revenue.[[4]](#footnote-4) Nonetheless, the market scenario was turbulent, and many similar start-ups were withdrawing. How could the company sustain its position in the current market? Was it ready to move into other similar markets using its current business model and innovative capabilities?

FITNESS and WELLNESS INDUSTRY

Modern lifestyles and increased awareness were the main drivers of growth in the global fitness and wellness industry. According to a 2017 report from the Global Wellness Institute, the wellness industry had recorded 10.6 per cent growth, from $3.36 trillion to $3.72 trillion, even during a period when the overall global economy shrank by 3.6 percent.[[5]](#footnote-5) The wellness industry comprised 10 major sectors, including fitness, healthy eating, yoga, beauty, and tourism and spa (see Exhibit 1). Among these sectors, the two areas that recorded the fastest growth between 2013 and 2015 were (1) preventive and personalized medicine and public health, and (2) fitness and mind-body practices (see Exhibit 2). In 2015, the fitness and mind-body sector contributed $542 billion to the global wellness economy.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In 2015, the revenue of the global health club industry reached $81 billion, as 151.5 million members visited almost 187,000 clubs. The United States was first in terms of both club count (36,180) and memberships (55 million) among the top 10 global health club industry markets. Brazil had the second-highest number of clubs (31,809), whereas Germany had the second-highest number of members (9.5 million). In terms of revenue generation, the United States topped the chart with $25.8 billion, followed by Germany with $5.4 billion. Brazil was at seventh position, with $2.4 billion. The statistics for Asia-Pacific and Middle East countries also reflected strong health club preferences. In 2015, 13 markets in the Asia-Pacific region attracted 17 million members to more than 31,000 health clubs. Ten countries in the Middle East and North African region accounted for approximately 5,600 health clubs and 3.4 million members.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The Indian fitness industry was significantly under-penetrated compared to those in many developed and developing countries. Deloitte and the Confederation of Indian Industries reported that the market penetration rate of fitness centres in India was abysmally low, at 0.5 per cent,[[8]](#footnote-8) compared to 16 per cent in the United States and 12 per cent in the United Kingdom.[[9]](#footnote-9) The Indian fitness market was dominated by unorganized and independent gyms, which were concentrated in the eight cities of Delhi-NCR, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai, Kolkata, Pune, Hyderabad, and Ahmedabad. These cities housed nearly 60 percent of the top corporations in the country.

Nevertheless, the Indian fitness industry was growing at a rate of 16–18 per cent annually and was expected to reach $1.18 billion by the end of 2017.[[10]](#footnote-10) The culture of fitness centres was gaining momentum in India largely because rising disposable per capita income and sedentary lifestyles were leading to lifestyle problems and diseases. Recognizing the fitness needs of the people, the Government of India had initiated measures to stimulate growth in this industry. The government had formed the Ministry of Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy (AYUSH), which had a separate department for yoga, and had declared June 21 as International Yoga Day.[[11]](#footnote-11) The government also planned to form a beauty and wellness skill development council to support the development of skilled employees for the beauty and wellness industry. Further, major Indian corporations were increasingly spending on the wellness of their employees to lower their health care costs and alleviate issues of low morale and productivity. Through this process, corporations were creating business opportunities for third-party fitness service providers such as counsellors, nutritionists, diagnostics practitioners, and fitness centres.[[12]](#footnote-12)

FITPASS concept

FITPASS was an app-based fitness and lifestyle brand that aimed to use technology to make fitness an affordable, accessible, and enjoyable experience for the Indian masses (see Exhibit 3). The parent company, Delhi-based Fitpass, was registered in July 2015 as an outcome of the founders’ vision of digitizing the fitness industry in India. According to Arushi Verma, “FITPASS [was] the one-stop solution for fitness and wellness.”

An economics graduate from the University of London, Arushi had worked with the World Bank Group and the Planning Commission of India. Her brother Akshay had completed a master’s degree at Oxford University, then worked with UBS Group in London as an investment banker. With an entrepreneurial mindset, the sibling duo had tried their hands at different ventures (Akshay launched a skill-centred marketplace, Skill Hippo, and Arushi founded the non-profit Agratam India Foundation) before coming together to set up FITPASS.

A FITPASS membership provided an all-access pass to more than 1,500 fitness establishments in the Delhi-NCR region at a flat rate of $15.30 per month (₹999).[[13]](#footnote-13) Most of the well-known gyms in Delhi-NCR (Talwalkars Gym, Gold’s Gym, and Fitness First, to name a few) offered annual or bi-annual memberships at lump sum prices ranging from $60 to $100. Some of these gyms charged additional one-time registration fees to secure user commitment.[[14]](#footnote-14) Their membership plans required the registered users to use the services of the same gym for the entire term and to pay for the complete term, even if they did not use the facility for months. In contrast, registered users of FITPASS had the flexibility of choosing from 100,000 workout options. They had access to multiple gyms and did not have to make a long-term commitment, so they could work out wherever and whenever they wanted.

FITPASS offered many new workout options such as Zumba, CrossFit, and kickboxing, which were popular with women, as well as gym workouts, which were more popular among men. It also offered FITFEAST, a service of a personal nutritionist and dietician that included a meal log, calorie counter, and water alarm; FITSHOP, which offered health supplements and sports merchandise; and FITCOACH, artificial intelligence (AI)–led workout regimes that were based on individuals’ personal fitness goals. The app was easily downloadable from both the GooglePlay and Apple app stores, and it had recently passed 100,000 downloads. Akshay said, “Our next step is to look for other geographies and incorporate more tech-led interventions to make FITPASS a one-stop-shop for fitness.”

FITPASS IN action

User Verification

Once a user downloaded the FITPASS app, they needed to register using a valid mobile number, which was then verified by the system using a one-time password. To facilitate personalized services, the app required registered users to provide details such as their weight, height, body composition, fitness goals, and preferred fitness establishment location. Each registered user was allotted a unique membership ID to facilitate smooth service delivery.

Workout Options

The app allowed users to filter the workout options available nearby (for example, gym workouts and strength exercises) based on workout time, distance from their preferred location, and star-rated reviews. Users could take up to five workout sessions at the same location in a month.

Reservations

Users could book workout slots at their preferred fitness centres through a secure payment gateway. The app allowed the users to choose membership plan durations ranging from one to three months. Once they had reserved, users received unique reservation codes (URCs) by email or text message, and the fitness establishments then used these URCs to verifying the bookings. A monthly membership started from the date a user purchased a plan. Users who were unable to use reserved workout times needed to cancel the sessions at least 1.5 hours before the scheduled times.

COMPETITION

The Indian online fitness marketplace was dominated by aggregators and discovery platforms. The Bengaluru-based Gympik Health Solutions Pvt. Ltd. (Gympik), founded in December 2012, was a health and fitness aggregator that provided a directory list of more than 12,000 fitness and wellness centres across India.[[15]](#footnote-15) Another start-up, Gymer Fitness Solutions Pvt. Ltd. (Gymer), provided a list of verified gyms on its website.[[16]](#footnote-16) FiTraQ, a Delhi-based fitness website launched in January 2014, helped users find good gyms and spas in their vicinity.[[17]](#footnote-17) FitnessPapa, a portal that allowed users to explore more than 500 fitness studios for a monthly membership of $15.30, was acquired by Gympik.[[18]](#footnote-18) In August 2015, Bengaluru-based Orobind Fitness Technologies Pvt. Ltd. (Orobind) raised funding to launch a fitness subscription service called Orobind Access. Fitness tracking start-up GOQii Technologies Pvt. Ltd. (GOQii) used Paytm to raise funding to launch a fitness coach marketplace that enabled people to hire trainers across India. However, many start-ups (such as Classverse, which initiated operations in 2015) closed because they were unable to achieve unit economies.[[19]](#footnote-19) According to Arushi, “Many fitness start-ups cropped up during 2015–16 but couldn’t sustain the competition. This was majorly due to a lack of understanding of the fundamentals of the market they were trying to serve. It resulted in financial stress for them, and they consequently got nipped in the bud.”

INNOVATION AT FITPASS

The Indian fitness and wellness sector had advanced rapidly through innovative business models and service delivery systems. It had also evolved significantly—from the days when fitness was linked to wrestling or body-building practiced in domestic *akharas* to a context that saw customized group fitness classes (for example, aerobics, Zumba, aerial yoga, and kickboxing) offered in modern fitness studios and supported by numerous product and process innovations. As Akshay noted, “This sector is facing a revolution spiked by the rise in the health and fitness-conscious generation, and we want to be a part of this revolution.” Among the first few players to enter the Indian fitness sector, Fitpass introduced numerous innovative practices to elevate its service offerings, thereby gaining a competitive advantage. The company’s innovation was reflected in its strategic service vision and business model and in the design of its service delivery system.

Service Vision

Operating throughout Delhi-NCR, Fitpass offered its users a boutique fitness experience that was unlike traditional single-gym or fitness studio memberships. On its online platform, users could buy monthly memberships and use these to reserve workout sessions across 1,500 partner gyms and fitness studios. The company brought the fitness establishments and users together for their mutual benefit. For the gym owners, who were struggling with poor capacity utilization rates owing to hefty annual membership fees and poor member commitment, it was a way to acquire more members without extra cost. For the users, it offered the flexibility and convenience to workout at any of 1,500 fitness centres across Delhi-NCR. Additionally, the users could access the fitness facilities any number of times during the month. Akshay summarized:

Gym owners in our country are struggling with the issue of poor capacity utilization owing to an exorbitant annual membership fee structures and a member drop-out rate of 60 to 70 per cent. We get a haircut every month, go for movies every week, but we don’t pay for the whole year in one go. So why do the gyms want the users to pay the annual fee at once? It’s fundamentally wrong. Over 97 per cent of the gym users are unable to derive their expected utility from an annual membership and feel cheated. Consequently, gyms in India have as low as 30 per cent utilization rate and they find it very tough to attract new customers and renewals.

This gap in the Indian fitness industry gave the company an edge in negotiating membership costs with the owners of fitness establishments, by transferring the margins to the users.

Business Model

Fitpass acted as a facilitator[[20]](#footnote-20) by bringing the fitness centres and users together on its online platform. It charged its users a monthly subscription fee of $15.30 and a quarterly fee of $38.28 for access to over 100,000 workout options. It was a cost-effective fitness alternative for active users, who would pay a minimum monthly fee of around $23.00 in any decent gym or fitness studio in the city. The company created partnerships with fitness establishments to pay a percentage of the cost per workout session per user at partner locations when users signed up using the FITPASS app. (Workout fees were between $2 and $4 per hour, depending upon the gym facilities.)

This value proposition suited the partners because it potentially improved capacity utilization and contributed to well-managed daily operations. Arushi boasted that the company had started with “65 partners in September 2015” and now had “a partner network of 1,500, with at least 10 adding every week.” The company selected partners based on a well-defined audit criteria, which included workout facilities (gym equipment, fitness trainers, and dieticians/nutritionists), workout schedule (availability of early morning and late evening workout sessions), and amenities (locker rooms, parking spaces, heating/cooling system, and security systems).

Fitpass had no external financial help or capital for the first two years. It generated profits within the first few months of its inception by controlling operating costs. In 2016, it generated revenue of $153,200 and achieved a monthly revenue growth of 30 per cent (generating monthly revenue of $15,320).[[21]](#footnote-21) After some initial challenges in developing partners, the company was able to partner with most leading gym and fitness studio chains by virtue of its attractive value proposition.

Besides its membership scheme, Fitpass also offered several innovative fitness products on popular online marketplaces. Each of these proprietary products was made up of a curated diet plan and a workout guide to help users achieve a personalized fitness goal, and the names of the products (for example, Six-Pack Abs, Sexy Calves, Dolay Sholay, 36-24-36, Pecs of Steel, and Bikini Bod) indicated customers’ goals.

Technology-Enabled Service Delivery System

As a health-tech company, Fitpass invested in technology to strengthen its service delivery system. It worked as a mobile application and web-based service and allowed its registered users to carry out cashless reservations for workout sessions based on their choice of time and location. Registered users could pick from more than 100,000 fitness options available at verified partner gyms and fitness centres. Most well-known gym chains, including Reebok CrossFit, Gold’s Gym, and Snap Fitness, were part of the Fitpass partner network. “We want to offer workout options for everyone, whenever and wherever they want,” Arushi expressed.

Fitpass built technology to deal with inefficiencies in the Indian fitness and wellness sector—specifically, the high upfront annual membership charges and lack of workout options. Since fitness needs were specific to individuals, the company customized its service offerings through its app. “We dealt with the diverse fitness needs of our users through our mobile application,” Arushi explained. Once a user had downloaded the app, signed up to create a user account, and subscribed for a membership, they could reserve workout sessions at any of the partner gyms and fitness studios. The user then received a URC by text message and email, and this URC, along with the FITPASS membership ID, acted as the entry pass for that user for the workout session. The app allowed users to set their own fitness goals (for example, in terms of losing or gaining weight or maintaining fitness) and helped them develop personalized fitness regimes on the basis of their physical assessments (for example, weight, BMI, body-fat percentage, or lean weight).

The FITPASS app had recorded more than 100,000 downloads since its launch in January 2015.[[22]](#footnote-22) “Our app allows us to engage with our users at a personal level and encourage them to workout. We have observed a trend: that if we can encourage our users to workout at least six times in a month, then their propensity to renew their FITPASS membership in the following month is over 93 per cent,” said Arushi.

The company had also developed an app for its partners to help them make data-driven business decisions. This helped the partners track the number of reservations made by users and the income they generated through FITPASS. Additionally, the review system on the app helped the partners improve their services based on customer feedback, thereby enhancing their customer base.

MANAGING INNOVATIVE CAPABILITIES

Believing in the value of continuous innovation for the success of their business, the owners of Fitpass invested in developing robust innovation capabilities in the areas of resources availability and allocation.

After being bootstrapped for the first two years, the company received its first series of funding, worth $1 million, from a group of domestic angel investors in December 2016.[[23]](#footnote-23) The company invested these funds in enhancing the user interface of its mobile app by incorporating personalized fitness management tools for users. It also improved the technological capability of its partner network by developing a software tool that tackled fitness centre management tasks ranging from member billing and trainer rosters to class schedules and payrolls. Impressed by the relevance of Fitpass’s service concept for new-age Indian consumers, Abhinav Bindra, India’s gold-medal Olympic shooter, invested in the company in June 2017.[[24]](#footnote-24) Arushi explained that the funding would strengthen the company’s resource base: “This infusion of capital will allow us to enhance the user experience and digitize the fitness economy. It is going to be a game-changer.”

To achieve its objective of using technology to creating accessible fitness services with little or no human intervention, the company worked on building a strong technology team. More than 50 per cent of its team of 25 was made up of technology professionals educated at the finest of institutes, with working experience in diverse service settings from investment banking to electronic retailing. “As our health-tech offerings are growing, we are investing in building our technical resource pool,” Arushi said.

Adapting to the Competitive and Technological Environment

While many look-alike mobile-based app companies (for example, Gympik, Fitternity Health E-solution Pvt. Ltd., and PlaynLive Sports India Pvt. Ltd.) entered the marketplace motivated by the opportunity to organize a highly fragmented Indian fitness market, these apps worked as fitness aggregators and discovery platforms and added little value to users’ overall fitness experience. Because they lacked innovative service concepts and had high operating costs, these companies were not able to get the attention of marquee venture capitalist firms. Learning from the experience of its competitors, Fitpass worked toward standardizing fitness services to reduce the information asymmetry and skewed pricing policies that were inherent in the country’s unorganized fitness market.

Taking advantage of technological advancements in enterprise solutions, the company developed and licensed a cloud-based business management software system for managing routine operations. Through this integrated system, the company stored partner data related to studio location, session schedule, and trainer availability for each of the 1,500 partners. This integration enabled the studios to notify the company of any changes or cancellations of session schedules or trainers. It also allowed the company to share new user registration data with the partners to facilitate a smooth user check-in experience at the partner facilities. This integration, with little human or manual overhead, helped Fitpass work with studios across the region with minimal operating cost. “Technology is our main instrument to bridge the gap between the people and their fitness goals,” Arushi emphasized.

Structural and Cultural Context

Fitpass evolved from a start-up with a four-member core team to a team of 25 members with diverse skills and experience. Under the strategic leadership of the two founders (Akshay was responsible for innovations in technology and strategies; Arushi was involved in operations, business development, and corporate alliances), the rest of the team was structured in departments with dedicated heads and clear guidelines on task delegation. “The small size of our team facilitates rapid experimentation and allows for the autonomy in innovations,” Akshay explained.

The company promoted fitness among the team by making it mandatory for each team member to register and undertake at least eight workouts in a month, without any charges, through FITPASS. Team members also followed nutritionist-recommended diets through the app to achieve their fitness goals. The fitness-oriented culture of the company was also apparent in its dress code, which emphasized active wear.

THE WAY FORWARD

The Indian fitness and wellness industry was at a turning point, and newer business models were emerging to organize this previously unorganized sector. As the first to enter this lucrative online fitness marketplace, Fitpass had witnessed promising growth so far. To stay relevant to its users, avoid the fate of some of its competitors, and expand to new markets, the company needed a concrete roadmap driven by continuous innovation.

The company had attracted funding, which it used to finance service innovations and expansion of its operations. As a step in the direction of expansions, it had started offering its proprietary products on a few e-commerce platforms apart from its own platform. It had also expanded its portfolio by providing in-app nutritionist services and AI-led workout regimes through curated videos in addition to its workout memberships. It had also added nutritional and health supplements to the sportswear and athletic merchandise it sold through its FITSHOP marketplace. Further investing in technology infrastructure, Fitpass had created in-house customer relationship management software to allow gyms and fitness studios to track their users and their membership plans.

With such a robust infrastructure in place, Fitpass had plans to expand to the four tier I cities of Pune, Ahmadabad, Jaipur, and Bangalore by the end of the year. As Akshay noted, “It is just a start for us, fit-tech is still a blue ocean with a lot remaining to be achieved.”

Exhibit 1: Global Wellness Economy

Global Wellness Economy

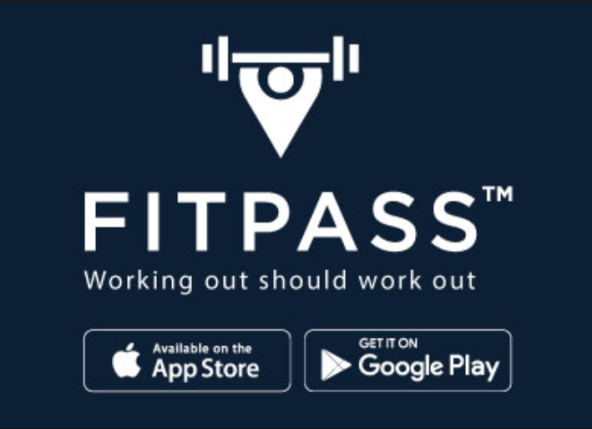
Source: Adapted from Global Wellness Institute, *Global Wellness Economy Monitor*,January 2017, 3, accessed July 21,2017, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54306a8ee4b07ea66ea32cc0/t/58862a472994ca37b8416c61/1485187660666/GWI\_WellnessEconomyMonitor2017\_FINALweb.pdf.

Exhibit 2: Wellness Economy Sectors (2013–2015)

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Wellness Economy Sectors** | **Market Size**  **(US$ Billions)** | | **Average Annual Growth Rate (%)** |
| **2013** | **2014** | **2013–2015** |
| Beauty and Anti-aging | 1,025.6 | 999.0 | −1.3 |
| Healthy Eating, Nutrition, and Weight Loss | 574.2 | 647.8 | 6.2 |
| Wellness Tourism | 494.1 | 536.2 | 6.8 |
| Fitness and Mind-Body | 446.4 | 542.0 | 10.2 |
| Preventive and Personalized Medicine and Public Health | 432.7 | 534.3 | 11.1 |
| Complementary and Alternative Medicine | 186.7 | 199.0 | 3.3 |
| Wellness Lifestyle Real Estate | 100.0 | 119.6 | 8.9 |
| Spa Economy | 94.0 | 98.6 | 2.5 |
| Thermal/Mineral Springs | 50.0 | 51.0 | 10.0 |
| Workplace Wellness | 40.7 | 43.3 | 3.1 |
| Wellness Economy | 3,367.8 | 3,724.4 | 5.2 |

Source: Adapted from Global Wellness Institute, *Global Wellness Economy Monitor*,January 2017, 4, accessed July 21, 2017, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54306a8ee4b07ea66ea32cc0/t/58862a472994ca37b8416c61/1485187660666/GWI\_WellnessEconomyMonitor2017\_FINALweb.pdf.

EXHIBIT 3: fitpass application screen shot



Source: Company documents.

1. All currency amounts are in USD unless otherwise specified. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. NCR was a circular coordinated planning region of approximately 58,000 square kilometres, roughly centred on Delhi. It encompassed the entire National Capital Territory of Delhi and several districts and prominent cities surrounding it in the states of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Haryana. The NCR was a rural-urban region with a population of over 46 million. New Delhi itself had about 19 million people and occupied almost 1,500 square kilometres. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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