

10 Indoor Climbing Gym Owner Tips

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in [CWA Blog](#)



As a climber-turned-aspiring-gym-owner turned multi-gym owner, the learning curve from 2017 to today has been a doozy. The number of ideas I nailed in my early business plan and got to implement at scale is not too shabby. The list of things I whiffed on is a bit longer...

There were ideas that I thought were dynamite that never could have worked (block scheduling for front desk!?!) and there were things that I simply never even considered (the true value of retail!).

With hindsight being the clearest view available, **here are 10 things that I wish I had known when I was considering starting a gym, and why they matter:**

This is not meant to be the top 10 secrets to success, but 10 easily controllable items new gym owners may not consider.

◦ **Jack of All Trades, Master of None - Bouldering vs. Roped Climbing**

When opening a gym, many prospective gym owners want to do everything but don't have the funds, the ceiling height, or the space, to do everything well. This looks like roped walls that are too short and total square footage per discipline that is... lackluster.

I have climbed at around 75 indoor climbing gyms across the globe, and a solid bouldering gym beats the heck out of a mediocre bouldering gym with a little roped section. Be willing to forego some items to make sure the ones you keep will shine.

◦ **Retail Sales Matter- but it's NOT about retail profit**

Retail sales are about membership retention! I will say it again.

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Working as a consultant, I have seen indoor climbing gyms that produce a wide range of their profitability through retail, ~1-20%. [Retail can absolutely be a profit center for your gym](#), but the biggest reason you must offer some form of retail is to capture opportunities to engage with your community and take them on the journey from someone who climbs to a *climber*.

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◦ **Parking is King**

It seems obvious, but if parking is too restrictive, people will not come (or they will need another form of convenient option). Whether it is street parking or a dedicated lot, free parking is a must-have for easing people into your space. Whatever you think you need, add more.

◦ **Behind the Walls is Great Storage, But Not Enough**

Whether the gym is 5,000 square feet or 40,000 square feet, storage space always seems to be a problem. It generally falls into one of four categories: retail storage, setter storage, general/seasonal storage, and office space.

When designing a gym, most operators are thinking about getting every square foot of climbing wall into the facility, often at the expense of other things. If you cannot run the business effectively behind the scenes, it will shine through to your finished product.

◦ **Young Kids Don't Have to be the Future of Your Gym**

Kids are great. I want children. I have been a part of a hugely successful competitive and non-competitive youth climbing program. I still am loathsome when a gaggle of children run beneath me as I am at the crux of my project, 12' off the mat and (Tom Cruise voice) *inverted*.

How you position yourself toward families and children and be a pivotal decision in how you achieve profitability. **Youth programming can be a cash cow**, but for many members of your other target demographics, **they could be the bane of their existence.**

This can generally be mitigated by thoughtful scheduling surrounding days and times, but the fact of the matter is, most parents will want to have their kids in the gym after work, which is skirting on prime-time hours.

◦ **The First Gym is an Achievement, but Market Security Matters**

With the onset of private equity backed chains and the growth of existing titans of the industry, the landscape of indoor climbing gyms has started to change. Add the visibility of 'Free Solo' and climbing in the Olympics, and we arrive in 2023.

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Opening and operating one successful gym is no longer a safe long-term strategy unless your single location can completely satisfy the needs of your market. The big players, you know who they are, are no longer hesitant to build a big, beautiful gym within striking distance of an existing player.

The smartest new gym operators that I have met in the last five years are generally those that had a strong vision for gym number two, before they opened gym number one.

◦ **Climbers are... weird**

Going from Amazon to Summit Climbing Yoga & Fitness, one of the starkest changes was working with part-time staff. The climbing industry attracts all types, many of whom are less concerned with setting up a 5-year plan vs. sending their 5-year project.

For any potential owners leaving a 9-5 in the corporate world for the climbing gym, keep in mind that how you schedule, communicate, compensate, and ultimately retain employees will be a world of hurt if you do not understand what you are walking into.

◦ **Cleanliness is next to Chris Sharma-ness, and it is HARD**

Chalk is an invasive species that we all welcome into every aspect of our lives.

To keep it simple, do not skimp on technology or outsourced professionals to keep the beast at bay. Chalkeaters, commercial-grade vacuums, and upgraded HVAC are just a few thoughts on how to tackle this problem. In general, if you are buying a product to address cleanliness in your gym and it is of a similar caliber to what you use at home, you are either WAY overdoing it at home, or you are going to be underprepared for keeping your gym clean.

◦ **Digital Media is Lifeblood**

Love or embrace social media and web design or be prepared to pay for someone who does, because in the beginning phases, this is a huge part of what makes or breaks gyms. The days of word-of-mouth advertising are behind us, because if you don't embrace it, someone else likely will and will eat your piece of the pie.

The Meta family of products (Facebook and Instagram), Google, etc. are all vital components to an appropriate marketing strategy and they require both money and time to be run effectively.

Educate yourself early and nail the basics, and it can become a non-invasive part of the overall gym ecosystem.

◦ Cameras + Audio

Two of my biggest gears to grind about gyms, when climbing or helping to run them, are faulty AV (audio/video) equipment. Like marketing, nailing this up front yourself or paying someone else to do so can save an immense amount of time and energy on the back end.

Video is absolutely necessary from a liability perspective. People may get hurt in your gym, and most of the time it will not be a big deal. However, the instance when it does escalate, **you will be grateful to have video saved** and the instance documented.

Audio is the soundtrack to the community's collective session; it helps set the tone for new users and the staples of the community alike. Shifty wiring or inadequately balanced equipment seems small but will start to grind on people's ears over time.

Conclusion

Ultimately, when designing a climbing gym, you will have to make compromises on one or more of the items above. The key to being as successful as possible with the resources you are bringing to the table is to understand as many of the inputs as possible to make the most educated decisions when you come to a crossroads.

A combination of short, medium, and long terms plans to achieve 100% of your overall vision is what will ultimately ensure long term stability and success for your community and gym.

About the Author



Paul Terbrueggen, aka Tall Paul, is an operations leader with 10+ years of experience. He offers small business consulting for gyms looking to streamline operations, increase retail revenue or otherwise grow their business. Previously he worked at [Summit Climbing, Yoga & Fitness](#) as the Retail Director and then Chief Operating Officer for their eight locations in Texas and Oklahoma. Prior to Summit, he led teams of up to 4,500 for Amazon Fulfillment Operations

An avid boulderer, he can often be heard claiming to be "more tall than talented" at 6'6". Paul enjoys all manner of activities, indoor or outdoor, especially when shared with his fiancée Becky and two puppies Penny Lane and Lil McGill (but everyone knows her as Nancy). In addition to

consulting and writing for the CWA, Paul is an analyst for End 2 End Outdoor, representing La Sportiva, Petzl, and Big Agnes.



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