

Beta Testing New Routes Without Pissing Off Your Members

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in [CWA Blog](#)



“Well, it is that time of year again . . .”

. . . is how I was going to start this article about how to implement new ideas into your gym. I am writing this in January, 2024, deep in the New-Year-Resolution-Boom (NYRB) of gym usage.

You are likely reading this near the end of Q1, just as we may be seeing the NYRB start to eddy out as people decide what habits work and what don’t for their lifestyle

In this article, I will dive into three main sections of how routesetting teams can use temporal landmarks, member insight, and athlete needs (eg: their youth team) to beta-test new things without pissing off their membership base.

Article At A Glance

- **Writer:** Andrew Carter Smith, Head Coach at Triangle Rock Club in North Carolina. Welcome Carter to our list of growing writers!
- **Who Should Read:** This article is for routesetters, and those in upper management with routesetting experience.
- **What Will You Learn:** This is a far reaching article that teaches us things about psychology, the benefits of planning, and most importantly, how routesetters can set without angering members.
- **Tie-Ins, Resources, or Further Reading:** We have put together a downloadable asset for routesetters to create a seasonal theme-based setting schedule. Read

When looking at evidence-based approaches to goal setting, we find that roughly one-third of all New Year's Resolutions are related to physical health,

As climbing rises in popularity, it is a logical assumption that climbing and climbing gyms would take up a larger space in this larger trend of early-year behavior change. As a climbing industry professional, I feel that we have an obligation to intentionally highlight ways that climbing can benefit one's health journey.

Gym managers may already be taking advantage of the phenomenon of temporal landmarks about trying new things, setting goals, changing behavior, or even running a membership sale; routesetters and setting teams may have an equally important and needed role in this aspect of the industry.

The three sections are as follows:

1. Temporal Landmarks and Short Term Changes (that could lead to bigger things)
2. Beyond The Comment Card (and why the loudest voices aren't always the right-est)
3. Balancing The Needs of Different Populations in One Gym.

Temporal Landmarks: Short-Term Changes (That Could Lead to Bigger Things)

Temporal Landmarks are essentially moments we use to define a specific place in a linear perception of time (Li & Dai, 2018).

Examples may include:

- "I am not 40 years old until my birthday"
- "I'll start running on the treadmill more after my work deadline"
- "I plan to climb Mon/Wed/Fri as a New Year's resolution!"
- "My morning starts with my alarm at 7:00 and ends once I finish my second coffee at work."

These help us delineate between the past, present, and future and can be powerful motivators in goal setting. However, there are positives and negatives for new things being tied to a temporal landmark.

One way that routesetters can take advantage of the cycle of the calendar is to beta-test new setting or route ideas for 1-month (or other short) periods and use a catchy name that helps show what, when, and why they are doing something.

Then, if it isn't amazing, they can scrap it. If it is great, they can expand the idea further.

Let's explore some temporal landmark-based programming for the first quarter of the year. The way I have written these is 3-key ideas:

- A catchy name. This is necessary to attract and hold attention.
- A routesetting aspect. Our whole point is to use these temporal landmarks for folks to understand what we're trying to do, and fight off negative reactions.
- A coaching/gym manager aspect.

The idea here is to mix things up in the setting of a gym without making any long-term promises or sweeping changes that may backfire.

Jump Into January

- Set a variety of dynamic movements around your gym (even 1-2 per lane/section of wall) and create a special start tag that displays why they are there! Maybe even hold a seasonal Dyno Comp!
- Social Media and Marketing can also be a fun way to highlight these changes and show the “Why” before people decide they hate it. Post videos of the moves, you could even highlight member submissions from the moves.

First Set In Feb:

- Consider having the first set of each week in Feb include “ask a setter” session where the route setters are around during the first few hours of the set being open.
- You could even host a “set and send” comp on a board/spray wall! Community events are often ways to garner buy-in. Highlight in the marketing how they can use the knowledge they glean from the Ask A Setter sessions for these movements.

Slab-Master-March

- You could introduce a MAGNUS-style Slab of the Week
- You could set Footwork Panels or something similar.
- Slab Climbing Masterclass with a setter/instructor/coach

Fall of the Spray Wall

- Set a rotating spray wall on a section of the gym
- Move it each month for ~3 months
- Use an app like STOKT
- Keep track of who climbs the most, who sets the most, etc., and have a potluck or party and award the members for their climbing.

Downloadable Content: Seasonal Planner

Inspired by this article, download a seasonal planner of content to build your own yearly temporal landmark calendar for setting. This is free for members.

[Download It Here](#)

Beyond The Comment Card: Why the Loudest Voices Aren't Always the Right-est

A study of hotel chain comment cards from the early 2000s did not allow accurate data on the average customer. When we think of ways routesetters can garner feedback, well-made comment cards are only part of the larger picture.

Many gym managers and setting teams may be familiar with some biases in comment cards or gym reviews, which can display skewed or polarized responses—without hearing from the quieter majority when gathering feedback about a given topic.

When setting teams make changes based on feedback from comment cards, the setters are catering only to the loudest voices, not most of their members.

Other ways to collect info include staying and watching the members (and team kids) climb on the new set after you clean up! Some setting teams may even be allowed to stay clocked in as they watch, take notes, and listen to the climbers' first experiences on the new routes.

One of the biggest mistakes I've made while trying to implement changes to my sets is not thinking about the end. Just as we discussed in the New Years Resolution section above, making changes to the way you do things needs to be done intentionally to be successful. I am a fan of using evidence-based approaches of goal setting in my routesetting as well (and communicating that clearly).

When we think about pissing off members, one thing to consider is why they are mad at a change. Are they mad because they liked things the way they were? Are they mad because of the way the change was carried out? This process can be informative.

From my experience, often it boils down to this universal concept: change is hard. Therefore, just as we consider additive and small goals, we want to make small changes that don't only remove something.

An example may be the transition from V-Grades to Range/Circuit Grades; something I am sure many of you have dealt with before! One way to do this could be to do the following steps over 6 months:

- Month 1, add a range color to all tags, and mention it on social media! Leave the v-grades but add a color to the tag.
- Month 2, on weird, morpho, or Risky/Complex moves do a range that matches the color
 - EG: Dyno gets V4-6, crimp line that relies more on intensity gets V5. Both are Yellow Tag.

- Month 3, Social Media Blast about why setting isn't only about grades! Consider posting about the new tags, potential goals for the system, and pros/cons! You may get valuable feedback.
- Month 4, Keep on with months 1-3 process, but garner customer feedback about the changes. If the pushback is too much, consider what/why you are trying to change. It may still be worth it, it may not.
- Month 5, using feedback, make decisions about changes: What stays the same, what doesn't. If moving towards circuit grades, now do all tags in V-Grade Range and keep color.
- Month 6: Cycle V-Grades off tag.

Here are a few reasons that I like this more than an overnight change: As new climbers arrive, they can help get used to the new way.

Range grades may be more accessible for new climbers so they don't have to learn the grading system just to attend a birthday party! Range grades also give more room for experimentation with the way you can set! How do you grade a Paddle Dyno? How do you grade a shadow walk?

Often grades are impacted by what you are used to seeing and therefore this can create movement-micro-chasms where the members develop the same weaknesses and strengths as the setters in their gym. By moving towards range grades, we lose some granularity of the way we set in exchange for more focus on the moves themselves.

Balancing The Needs of Different Populations in One Gym

Let's face it, climbing gyms fit the needs of multiple people, groups, and communities. We think about community events (demos etc.), comps, regular-ole-members, and team kids to name just a few.

As the head coach of a large youth climbing team in North Carolina, I spend a lot of time finding ways that my team can get what they need without inequitably impacting the regular user base. For routesetting, **this means finding ways that the community can find what they're looking for** at the same time as the team.

Many gyms solve this in different ways. These are generalizations, but from what I have seen: SportRock has the SportRock Performance Institute, Bloc Haven and Method both set pretty much everything in a more comp-y style, Stone Summit and Movement (Team Texas) both have Team Training Centers, and so on.

Each team and setting team work together in different ways. However, I feel that it is the job of the setting team to key a finger on the pulse of what the team needs are both seasonally (is Regionals coming up?) as well as more generally (is the gym more "old school" or "outdoorsy").

In the end, when we think about trying new things or making changes without pissing off your user base, we have to identify who your user base are, what their needs are, and what are you trying to implement or change.

About the Author



Carter Smith is a coach, routesetter, and outdoor educator. He is currently the Head Coach for Triangle Rock Club and lives in North Carolina with his partner and 2 dogs. Carter received his Masters in Experiential and Outdoor Education from Western Carolina University in 2022. Carter's passion lies in helping children and adults to use climbing as a vehicle for self discovery."



2024 CWA SUMMIT SESSION SPOTLIGHT: OPENING A CLIMBING GYM

March 25, 2024

COMMUNITY BUILDING IN INDOOR CLIMBING GYMS: PART 2



March 12, 2024