

A buzz beyond benefits

YOUR BODY

Bevan James Eyles

If you speak to someone successful in sales about their process of getting somebody to buy a product or service, there's a high chance that they will mention that they "sell the benefits".

They don't say "this heater will heat your house to 28 degrees", they say "when you walk in from a cold winter's day you will be welcomed by a comfortable summer-like heat that will make you feel relaxed and help the stresses of your day melt away".

Selling the benefits has been used for years in all types of marketing and sales work. One of the best industries to embrace selling the benefits is the fitness industry. I was on the internet the other day and I saw a 1940s newspaper ad for Charles Atlas' exercise programme. For those of you who don't know who Charles Atlas is – he was an early pioneer of bodybuilding. The ad implied that "skinny guys" would pick up hot chicks if they got his programme and started building muscle – now that's selling the benefits.

Through the years, the fitness industry has got better and better at selling you the benefit of the service or product that they want you to buy. These benefits can be easy results, a healthier you, a happier you and you may even become more sexually attractive. While some of the benefits can be stretched slightly to entice you to buy the product, exercise does provide you with a lot of results that are good for your life.

But sometimes there's a benefit that sales completely forget about . . . The other day I was out having a great run. I'd set some targets to focus on in that session and I was nailing them, my iPod had my favourite music on which made me want to go faster. At this moment nothing could stop me, I felt like I was an Olympic runner going for the gold medal – it felt amazing.

While there would be physical benefits from me working at this intensity it wasn't about that. The feeling of running fast was the best feeling I had that day – the movement itself was the buzz. When a lot of people think about the movement of exercise they think about pain, about how hard it is. Sure, when you first start exercising, there will be discomfort but if you stick at it you will learn about the buzz of your body moving in ways it enjoys. Now that's a benefit!

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» YOUR HEALTH

Enthusiasm: Stephanie DeMay takes a Nia fitness and movement class in Christchurch.

Photo: DON SCOTT/FAIRFAX NZ

Nia dance your way to fitness

I'm a penguin and Norah Jones is belting out about New York City being such a beautiful disease. Playing at being a cute flightless bird, then a cowboy, then a jazz dancer is just part of the experience of Nia dance. I might not be as graceful as a ballet dancer, but the idea is to have fun rather than sign up for the Royal New Zealand Ballet. Like most people, I hadn't heard of this unique form of dance fitness until I was introduced to it by a personal trainer, who organised a trial class for participants in a boot camp I was attending. I had been looking for something in the way of dance, something to keep me moving that would hold my interest. One class later I was hooked, despite my lack of dance experience, which consisted mainly of ballet taken at the age of 12. I signed up for the rest of the term and now attend two classes a week.

So what's the attraction? Unlike karate (in which I have a brown belt), Nia dance is done at each person's own individual level. You listen to your body and move as much or as little as your body wants to. While everyone follows the basic dance steps and arm movements, just how much we bend or how fast we move depends totally on ourselves and our abilities. At the same time, it is just so much fun – often I'll

A group exercise that combines martial arts with dance is gaining popularity in Christchurch. KARIN O'DONNELL investigates.

notice other people in the class smiling while they are dancing – and our teacher Stephanie DeMay's enthusiasm is contagious.

These days I can get my feet around the jazz square, do a passable Charleston, and one-two-cha-cha-cha with the best of them. Just don't ask me to add arm movements though – my fledgling co-ordination can only cope with one thing at a time.

Deceptively low impact, Nia offers a high-powered, energetic cardio workout within a fitness programme, combining elements of jazz, modern and Duncan dance with martial arts – tai chi, tae kwon do and aikido – and yoga. It incorporates the teachings of Moshe Feldenkrais (the conscious awareness of sensation) and the Alexander technique.

Nia (pronounced "nee-uh"), which used to stand for Neuromuscular Interactive Action, was first established in the United States and has been around since the early 1980s.

Taught in more than 45 countries around the world, this dance and fitness programme made its way to New Zealand 13 years ago.

Founders Debbie Rosas and former tennis professional Carlos AyaRosas, at the time successful aerobics instructors, found a visit to a martial artist changed their way of thinking about movement. When the martial artist told them to "move", they were shocked to discover that, while they could perform aerobics movements, they were not as flexible as they expected themselves to be. Following this revelation, they set out to find a way of improving fitness and gaining flexibility without damaging the body. Two years of research led to the development of the holistic dance programme we know today as Nia.

The philosophy is that there is no need to use pain to change the body; exercise becomes pleasure rather than punishment. Yet as an exercise routine, Nia is a gentle, non-impact movement that is safe for the joints,

effective, and, best of all, fun. Seeing "movement as medicine", it is adaptable to all ages and all levels of fitness. The focus is on flexibility, agility, stability, mobility and strength. Toned muscles are a welcome by-product, as is a better understanding of the body.

A profound part of the programme, the music, which mostly falls into the "world" category and includes vocalists like Louis Armstrong, Moby and Norah Jones, is turned up loud, every beat inspiring a dance move.

The hour-long classes have seven cycles, starting with focus and intention. Then there is the invitation to step in, followed by the warm-up, the get-movement cycle, cooling down and finishing our movement with some FloorPlay (often yoga-like and stretching movements). The final cycle is stepping out.

We also regularly get the opportunity for FreeDance in between choreographed pieces, which allows us to experience new sensations of movement in the body. It is empowering to move around the room knowing that you're doing this only for one person – yourself.

As part of the Body Festival, Stephanie DeMay is offering introductory Nia workshops. Full details are at thebody.co.nz