How climbing gyms handle memberships, punch cards and pauses

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Most climbing gyms sell the same floor space four ways: as a recurring membership, a 5x, 10x or 20x punch card, a monthly card, and a single visit at the door or desk. The four look similar on a price list and behave completely differently in the system — different revenue recognition, different expiry rules, different ways of breaking, and very different things happen when a customer asks for a pause.

Five products

Recurring membership. The customer pays on a billing cycle they choose or are offered (typically 1, 3, 4, 6 or 12 months), by saved card, a monthly invoice, or direct debit, and climbs as often as they like. Predictable revenue, and clearly the best product for a gym's cash flow. The operational cost is renewal: the card expires, the payment fails, and someone has to notice.

Monthly card. The customer buys a card valid for one month and can climb as much as they like within it. After the month, the door closes, and the customer then buys a new card and it starts over.

Punch card. The customer buys a bundle of visits and uses them over months. The money comes in up front, which climbers like because there's no commitment, and gyms like because it's money today. The catch is that unused visits are a liability you're carrying, and in many jurisdictions they're deferred revenue, not income — ask your accountant before assuming a month was as good as the till says. Remember to expire punch cards after a set period (usually 3–12 months, depending on the card).

Single visit. A day pass. Simple, and the product almost every member starts with. It's worth building conversion around: a first-timer's day pass should make it obvious what a ten-visit card would have cost. Another good product is a first-timer's 3x card, which usually gets them into the sport more than once and nicely lifts conversion to a regular.

Value card is a fifth, rarer form: the customer loads money instead of visits, and both visits and café purchases draw it down. Flexible, and the hardest of the four to reconcile, because it's effectively a stored-value instrument. Unless you remember to denominate it in arrows or squirrel pelts or the like, in which case it stops being euros (or your currency) in the books.

How do climbing gyms actually handle memberships?

The mechanisms that actually matter, roughly in the order they cause trouble:

Validity windows. A card isn't just valid or not; it's valid *at certain times*. Off-peak memberships, student terms, summer cards. The window has to hold at the door just as much as at the till, or it's just a pricing suggestion — see how access control works.

Failed payments. By far the biggest source of silent revenue loss. The card expires, the charge fails, and unless something surfaces it, the member climbs for free and the problem shows up at year-end. You need a retry schedule, a customer notification that *names* the problem, and a list someone looks at weekly. Card tokenization — the gym stores a token rather than the card number, and the provider updates it when the card is renewed — removes a large share of these before they happen. And, of course, denying the customer access once the payment fails.

Pauses. Covered below, because they deserve their own section.

Cancellations. Decide on a notice period and follow it exactly. The most common avoidable complaint in this category is a member who cancelled and got charged one more time because the cancellation landed after the billing run. If your system can't cancel effective from a future date, it will generate that complaint every month.

Family and company cards. One payer, several climbers. Easy to sell and awkward to model: every climber needs their own record — for the waiver, the belay test and the access log — while the money belongs to just one of them. A system that models this as one customer with several names loses track of the waivers. One solution is to create a customer for each person, but attach a set number of credentials to the company's account, distributed to the employees.

What pausing a membership actually has to do

"Can I pause for two months, I'm injured?" is the most common membership request at a climbing gym, and it's the point where systems fall over, because a pause isn't one action:

1. **Stop billing** for the duration of the pause.
2. **Cut off access** for the duration of the pause, so someone on pause can't badge in.
3. **Push billing dates forward** by the length of the pause, so the customer doesn't lose a paid-for period and the next charge lands where they expect it.
4. **Resume automatically** on the agreed date, without anyone having to remember.
5. **Handle an early return**, when a member recovers in three weeks instead of two months — which means reconciling against the pause actually used, not the one requested.

Gyms that do this by hand almost always get it wrong at step 3 or step 5, and the error is invisible until the member notices they were charged a month too early. The honest test for a membership system isn't whether it has a pause button; it's what that button does to the next twelve billing dates.

Punch cards have the same problem in a different shape: an injured climber with four visits left and an expiry date needs the expiry pushed back, not the visits refunded.

Common mistakes

- **Pricing a ten-visit card at exactly ten single visits.** That makes it a loyalty card with no loyalty benefit. The discount is what buys you the money up front and the commitment; if

you're not willing to give it, sell single visits instead.
- **Making punch cards valid forever.** Unlimited validity sounds generous and builds an unlimited liability. A long, clearly stated validity period — with a pause mechanism for genuine injuries — is more honest than an infinite one you quietly change later.
- **Treating a failed payment as the customer's problem.** It's usually just an expired card. Tokenization, an automatic retry and a plain-language message recover most of them without anyone getting embarrassed at the desk.
- **No state between "active" and "cancelled."** On pause, awaiting first payment, in payment failure, and expired are all different things, and staff need to see which one they're looking at when someone's standing in front of them.
- **Not measuring visits per member.** Revenue tells you what happened last month. Visit frequency tells you what's going to happen in three months. A member whose visits drop to zero cancels about two months later, and that gap is the only window where you can actually do something about it.

What's worth measuring

Four numbers worth putting somewhere you see them weekly:

Number	Why it matters
Active memberships by type	The base your fixed costs are covered from
Open failed payments	Money already earned and not yet collected
Punch-card liability (unused visits × value)	Revenue you've taken but not yet delivered
Members with no visit in 30 days	Your churn pipeline, running about two months ahead

None of these need analytics expertise. They need memberships, the door and the till to share one customer record — which is the entire case for a single system, see [what a climbing gym management system is](#).

Frequently asked questions

Should a climbing gym sell memberships or punch cards? Both, and deliberately. Punch cards convert first-timers who won't commit; memberships make the rent predictable. The useful question is what your split actually is, and whether your pricing is steering it where you want — if almost everyone is on a punch card, membership is priced wrong or isn't being offered at the right moment.

How long should a ten-visit card stay valid? Long enough that a regular climber doesn't lose visits after an ordinary winter, and short enough that your liability is bounded. Twelve months is the common compromise. Whatever you pick, print it on the card and enforce it without arguing — the goodwill cost of a disputed expiry is far higher than the stamp.

Can members pause it themselves? Yes, in systems that support it, and allowing it usually reduces cancellations: someone who can pause for two months often will, while someone who has to email the desk cancels instead. Worthwhile limits are a maximum length and a number of times per year.

What's the best way to collect recurring payments? A saved card, tokenized, is the lowest-friction option, and it's the one that lets the charge survive a card renewal. Invoicing suits corporate customers and members who want it. GymKeeper supports recurring card charging via Paytrail and Stripe, and recurring invoicing including e-invoices.

What about employer wellness benefits? In Finland, they're a significant share of a climbing gym's revenue and don't behave like cards, with a couple of exceptions: they're vouchers or balances belonging to an employer's benefit scheme. GymKeeper's web shop accepts Smartum, ePassi, Edenred and SportID alongside Stripe, Paytrail, Checkout, PayPal and Montonio, so a customer can pay part of a purchase from a benefit balance and the rest by card.

GymKeeper handles memberships, punch cards, value cards, pauses, recurring card charging and invoicing against one customer record, shared by the till, the door and the web shop. The feature list has the details, and what a climbing gym system costs covers the price.

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