Opening a climbing centre: a systems checklist

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When setting up a climbing gym, the walls tend to get the lion's share of attention, and rightly so — that's the product. But once the gym opens, the name of the game becomes customer service, and hopefully not a queue in front of the desk, but customers getting on the wall without delay.

This is the other list. It assumes that the building, route-setting and insurance are already someone else's problem, and focuses on the systems side: what to decide, in what order, and which decisions block which others.

Long before any decisions

Fixed costs kill, and location, location, location. Thinking carefully about these two things will take you a very long way. Once you find a location, make sure it's accessible to customers. Then work out how many customers you would need to bring through that space on an average day, and ask yourself whether that number is remotely realistic.

If it isn't, find a smaller, cheaper or differently situated space. In our experience, it is always easier to expand than to shrink. Rented space is often easy to grow into, but costly and difficult to reduce.

6–12 months before: decisions that constrain everything else

What exactly are you selling? Write your price list before you choose any software. Not "memberships and day passes" but an actual list with actual rules:

- Day pass. Discount for students, over-65s, under-18s? Where does the free-entry cut-off sit — age 7, or something else?
- Punch card. Ten visits? Twenty? What discount compared to ten day passes, and what is the expiry period? The expiry period is fairly non-negotiable, because if your cards never expire you carry an ongoing liability to customers in your accounts that accumulates year after year. Whether it's 6 months or 12 months is your own choice, though.
- Membership. Open-ended or a twelve-month commitment? What is the notice period? Can it be paused, and for how long? And how many times?
- Courses. Beginner, lead and youth groups. Prerequisites, capacity, instructors. In reality, courses — especially in the early stages — don't fill up, no matter how many customers say in advance that they want them. This has been seen time and again.
- Rental. Shoes, harnesses, chalk. Per item or bundled with entry? We recommend a climbing package, because it lets you fold the shoes into the same VAT rate as climbing itself. In Finland, for example, climbing is currently taxed at 13.5% and shoe rental at 25.5%, whereas a climbing package is 13.5%. On a package price of €18 (€14 climbing, €4 shoe rental), the VAT saving is €0.34. Multiply that by, say, 30 climbing-package visitors per day and you're looking at nearly €4,000 difference on an annual basis. Every little helps...

- Retail. Are you selling shoes and chalk from day one? Are you doing it on a consignment account or with your own stock? How large an inventory is it worth buying in advance — or is it worth it at all?

This list will determine your software choice more than any feature comparison, because the hard parts of a gym system are the *rules*, not the transactions. The mechanics of memberships and punch cards are covered in the article memberships, punch cards and pauses.

Will there be unstaffed hours? Answer this early, because it determines your door hardware, your insurance conversations and your waiver process — and all three have operational implications. Boulder-only spaces are the common case. Talk to your insurer before your hardware supplier — the answer often shapes which hours you can legally sell. The mechanics are covered in the article how access control works in a climbing centre.

One location or eventually more? If a second site is genuinely on the roadmap, check now whether your candidates price per location and whether two sites can share a single customer database. If you are setting up multiple limited companies to manage risk, does the system support locations operating under different business IDs? Doing this retrospectively is painful; choosing correctly now costs nothing.

Three months before: choose and start the setup

Choose your system. Once you have your price list and your answer on unstaffed hours, a proper comparison is possible. The questions that separate candidates most quickly are covered in the article what is a climbing centre management system, and the financial side — including the hardware and migration costs that never appear in a price list — in the article what does a climbing centre system cost.

Order your hardware. Till, card terminal, receipt printer, cash drawer, door controllers, gates and card readers, tablet for waivers. Lead times for door hardware and for the card terminal agreement are both measured in weeks, and the terminal agreement is the one that catches people off guard — it is a separate contract with a payment processor, not something your software vendor sells you.

Choosing a card terminal With card terminals it is important to distinguish between the terminal rental and the merchant agreement. Someone may offer the terminal for free, but the merchant agreement carries a 3% commission. That starts to hurt once you move into, say, a million in till sales.

Suppose the more expensive terminal costs €50 a month (it doesn't really) with 0.5% commission, and the other is free with 1.5% commission.

More expensive: 50×12 = €600 + €500 = €5,600. Cheaper: 0×12 = €0 + €15,000 = €15,000.

The cheaper option turned out to be nearly €10,000 more expensive per year. Do the maths carefully, and ask if you need help!

Open a merchant account. This takes longer than you expect, and it cannot be rushed at the end.

Write your house rules and liability waiver. Have a qualified person in your jurisdiction draft or review it, then load it into the system in a format you can retrieve years later. See electronic liability waivers for what the system needs to do with it — especially if you are opening with unstaffed hours, where the waiver must gate the door rather than the desk.

Decide on your accounting integration. Ask your accountant which system they use before assuming an export file will be enough. GymKeeper integrates with Procountor, Netvisor, Fennoa, VismaNova, Dynamics NAV and Accountor; if yours isn't on the vendor's list, find out now what a monthly reconciliation actually looks like in practice. We can warmly recommend Fennoa. It's a pleasure to use and a pleasure to integrate with.

One month before: build and practise

Enter your products. All of them, with the correct prices and the correct rules. This is the stage that gets left to the final week and always takes longer than expected, because entering products is the moment when you discover the rules you hadn't yet decided.

Remember payment methods for employee fitness benefits. Order these in good time!

Set up the online shop. Selling passes, courses and gift cards online lightens the desk load from day one, and gift cards will be bought in December whether you are ready or not. Decide which payment methods to enable: cards, bank links and — in Finland — employer fitness benefits, which make up a significant share of a climbing centre's revenue. GymKeeper supports Stripe, Paytrail, Checkout, PayPal and Montonoi as well as Smartum, ePassi, Edenred and SportID.

Run through the customer app. In test mode, purchase every product, check that each pass is generated correctly, take out an annual membership the way you intend to sell it and confirm that it is generated correctly too. This is your responsibility, even though the system provides the tools.

Practise the desk. Run a full day with staff and friends: sell a day pass, sell a punch card, rent shoes, sell a coffee, take a card payment, process a refund and close the till. Every gap you find here is a gap you would otherwise find with twelve people in the queue.

Test the door with a real punch card. Not a test account — a card purchased through the till, on the actual reader. Then test what happens when it runs out, and what happens when the network cable is unplugged.

Run the end-of-day process once properly. Before opening. It is a process your staff will run every evening for years, and the first time should not be the first evening. Learn how to reconcile the till, even though cash barely moves these days.

The float can be whatever you like, but somewhere in the €200–400 range is perfectly fine. When the float is, say, €250 and the day's cash sales are €484, start by taking all the money out, then use a cash counter (the figure is on the end-of-day report) to confirm there is indeed €484 + €250

= €734. If it tallies, put the €250 back in the same denominations as before — a sensible mix of €50, €20, €10 and €5 notes and an appropriate amount of coins. If the till doesn't balance, think through how to handle that situation and write up instructions for your till staff.

Opening week

- **Watch the queue, not the dashboard.** The bottleneck on day one is almost always the waiver or the card terminal, and both can be fixed within an afternoon once you can see which it is.
- **Expect first-timers to dominate.** Most of your early customers will never have been to a climbing centre before. The journey from "walks in" to "climbs" is that week's product.
- **Keep a manual backup.** A printed price list and some way to take payment if the system is down. You probably won't need it; not having it is the kind of thing that ruins an opening day. For example, an iZettle terminal and MobilePay are good to have on standby in case something goes wrong or the main terminal doesn't arrive in time.

First three months

- **Watch visits per member, not just revenue.** Revenue tells you about last month; visit frequency tells you about next quarter.
- **Check failed payments weekly.** Recurring card charges fail for mundane reasons — an expired card — and a member who isn't paying but is still climbing is invisible unless someone looks.
- **Revisit your price list.** Within eight weeks you will know which products people actually want, and changing them now is far easier than after a year's worth of accumulated exceptions.
- **Look at products sold and see which ones rise to the top day after day and week after week — you can spot them easily on the dashboard.**
- **Only then think about off-peak products.** Once you have a few weeks of hourly visit data, you can see which slots are empty — and that is exactly what you price an off-peak membership, morning pass or late-night pass against.

Common questions

What software does a climbing centre need to open? At a minimum: something that sells and checks entry, records waivers and takes card payments. Everything else — bookings, courses, access control, invoicing, online shop — is a question of whether you need it from day one. A single-space gym with staffed hours only can genuinely open with less than people assume.

Do I need door hardware on day one? Only if you are opening with unstaffed hours. If not, it makes a perfectly good project for another week — by then you will have visit data showing which hours would actually sell.

How long does software setup take? Entering products and prices is a meaningful piece of work, and it is proportional to how well you have decided your price list. A gym that arrives with a finished price list is typically up and running within days; a gym that is still deciding takes as long as the deciding does.

Can I import data from my current system? Usually yes, provided the old system can export it at all. Members, remaining punch-card balances and waivers are the three things that matter, and card balances are the one that gets forgotten — without them, migration costs you customer goodwill on day one.

GymKeeper is a climbing centre management system developed in Finland by GymKeeper Oy, used by climbing centres, adventure parks and sports facilities: memberships, till, access control, waivers, courses, rental, online shop, invoicing and reporting in a single system. If you are planning a gym, get in touch — the questions above are easier to answer against a specific site.

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