



Research indicates 78 percent of homebuyers want walking and biking paths, whereas only 22 percent want a golf course.

NATURAL SURFACE TRAILS

Now the most popular amenity

» RANDY MARTIN

Ask, "What has changed in the market in the last five years, and how might I better serve this evolving market?"

While it may be difficult to identify subtle shifts in consumer preferences, there is one trend that is overwhelming: the emphasis on exercise and fitness. It presents a tremendous opportunity for builders and developers who capitalize on it by incorporating low-cost natural surface trails into their community designs.

CONSIDER THESE HEALTH STATISTICS

[1] 63 percent of Americans are convinced of the virtues of fitness, and many of those are looking for convenient ways to meet their fitness goals.

[2] Nearly nine out of every 10 Americans believe that regular exercise is essential to weight management.

[3] Half of the U.S. population tried to lose weight in 2004,

including 68 percent of those who were overweight.

Combine those figures with increasing awareness of the problem of obesity, particularly in children, and the ever-growing emphasis on living a healthy lifestyle through both exercise and diet that pervades American culture, and it's apparent that there is a huge existing market that is predisposed to exercise. That is the market that community trails target.

In addition to general consumer research, surveys by the National Sporting Goods Association indicate that activities related directly to natural surface trails are increasing rapidly. Since 2000, trail-related participation in the U.S. has increased from 135 million to 155 million. That's 20 million additional participants and an increase of 15 percent in just a few years. And the new total is clearly not a niche market; it's an immense mass market composed of more than half of the total American population.

Another source, a 2005 American Lives survey of potential homebuyers, found that 78 percent want walking and biking paths, compared with only 22 percent who want a golf course, which is far more expensive to construct and

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maintain. (Trails cost \$40,000 a mile to build and \$1,000 per mile per year to maintain; a golf course costs about \$500,000 per hole.)

People of all ages use natural surface trails because of their ability to accommodate a wide variety of activities.

WHAT TRAILS PROVIDE FOR KIDS

According to Cornell University research, nature walking might help kids cope better with the pressures of school. The findings show that children deprived of regular access to nature are more vulnerable to the types of stress kids typically face in school. And of course, an experience with nature gives them an alternative to watching TV and video games.

WHAT TRAILS PROVIDE FOR TEENAGERS

Trails give youth who have not yet gotten their driver's license the freedom to get on their bikes and safely go to a friend's house, the ball field or to school without depending on parents. Later as their legs get stronger, trails provide an opportunity for excitement. If the trail is designed right, it can be just like a roller coaster.

WHAT TRAILS PROVIDE FOR GEN Y:

This "Connected Generation" spends significant amounts of time on the computer, listening to their iPod and exploring a full range of media. To balance this, trails become a necessary connection to the nondigitized environment.

WHAT TRAILS PROVIDE FOR GEN X:

This is perhaps the group that is most disposed to exercise and fitness. Now in their thirties and forties, they are in the prime of their life, and they want to stay that way. Because they are established in careers, they are prime prospects for purchasing a new home, and when they do, they will find trails especially appealing

WHAT TRAILS PROVIDE FOR BOOMERS

Still seeking the excitement of their youth, trails provide challenge, a roller coaster, a "make it to the top" experience as well as the exercise that their doctors are now recommending.

WHAT TRAILS PROVIDE FOR THE GREAT GENERATION

An environment to stimulate new ideas, movement, heart health, equilibrium and balance ... an invigorating tonic for the effects of aging.

Across all demographics, trails have powerful appeal. But remember those 63 percent of Americans who are convinced of the virtues of fitness? Trails will lend added value and sales velocity to the communities.

A custom-designed and constructed trail, with advertising and public relations promoting it as well as signage along the trails, is a fantastic opportunity for a developer or builder to set themselves apart, and get on the path of a rapidly growing market. 



RANDY MARTIN president of TrailScape Inc., is an avid cyclist/trail runner, and a development partner on two projects in the Central Valley on the edge of the Sierras where Natural Surface trails are a primary amenity. He has an office in Costa Mesa, CA.

TRAILScape.NET
949-400-4107