



Hi!

Thanks for downloading this. I wrote this for our Community Trainers off the back of our recent Level 1 course where we talked about wild and wonderful trappings of the fitness industry. Let's just remember that it is an industry and in order to function it needs to be constantly reinventing the wheel and selling us more things... Here's how we analyse whether these things are useful or not.

I hope it's helpful. I've left my email at the end, please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Enjoy,  
Andrew



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# 'Is this a thing?' Baloney Detection and Applying Critical Thinking to the Fitness Industry

One day I'd like to sit down and write about my ambivalence towards the fitness industry. While a lot of good ideas have emerged from underneath that umbrella, I'd argue that the best outcomes of the industry happen despite its current structure, not because of it. For today, I just want to talk about applying your own critical thinking skills when evaluating a claim, belief, piece of equipment or hot new trend.

First things first, the fitness industry is an industry. It's amorphous and composed of many interests: clothing brands, equipment manufacturers, supplement manufacturers, credentialist bodies, writers, publishers, fitness trainers and now social media influencers. All these interests exist to make money from you.

This is true for the general population trying to 'get fit' and for fitness professionals stuck in the hamster wheel of earning and maintaining the latest certifications while keeping on top of the newest trends.

Most of the information you're exposed to, will eventually lead you to spend your money on some sort of gadget, programme or magic potion. Even if you don't spend money on purchasing something, you might spend your time following specific programmes or learning about new ideas. **The purpose of this article is to help you decide how to spend your time and money so you get the most out of your efforts.**

The key to making money in 'the industry' is to constantly repackage the same ideas, gadgets and promises in new ways. Anyone who's been around long enough will recognise the unending cycle of training modalities and nutritional fads commodified into new marketing niches every few years.

Robert Anton Wilson and Nassim Taleb both talk about modern society's neophilia or neomania, a love or obsession with new things. This ties in with marketing trends like planned obsolescence or hype cycles. Basically we don't really need any new or special gadgets to move around and be healthy, but new ideas are required to attract investment.

There's no reason people can't develop broad levels of capabilities through spending time in nature with family and friends. You don't need any special equipment or secret programmes.

Most people would be fine with a few heavy objects like stones or logs, some tree branches, and your own body. There are reasons why this isn't practical for most people.

Unfortunately there are many barriers to physical activity and conviviality, but that's a topic for another piece. Additionally, there's nothing wrong with specialised equipment or chasing sport specific goals. **Just find something you enjoy that gets you moving in a variety of ways. That could be walking with friends, powerlifting, martial arts or playing with your kids.**

There are a few concepts I want to talk about, we can use these ideas to develop heuristics for deciding whether or not we really need to incorporate this new exercise or gadget into our lives.

## **The Killer App and Is This a Thing?**

Dan John introduced this idea of the killer app about 10-15 years ago. Simply, every piece of equipment has a few applications that it is extremely well suited to. (And a host of other movements that are questionable uses of time and energy.)

**For example:**

Barbells are good for heavy lifts and precise progression. If you want to build up to a 200 kg deadlift with .05 kg increments, the barbell is your tool. It's required for powerlifting and olympic lifting and will get you very strong at deadlifts, overhead presses and other classic multi joint movements.

Kettlebells are good for swinging and explosive movements or anything that benefits from unbalanced weight distribution. Think swings, cleans snatches, goblet squats, carries and get ups.

Suspension trainers are good for rows and upper back training or changing the direction of resistance in certain movements that can be hard to set up. They're also useful for adjusting balance and support in unilateral movements.

Strongman sandbags are good if you need simple, heavy objects to pick up, carry and throw around. (I'm not so keen on those skinny sandbags with lots of handles.)

Medicine balls are good for throwing and catching. It's nice to have something you can move ballistically without a fear of breaking anything.

Open hex bars are great for lifting heavy weights and very heavy carries along with semi-unilateral training options. Also a great way to quickly get people confident lifting without needing to learn specialised skills.

The inverse is also true though.

For every 'killer app' there are loads of filler exercises that work in a pinch but are often not a great use of time. I'm thinking of all the elaborate dance moves associated with suspension trainers when they first came out, or some of the fancy and flashy kettlebell moves that seem more trouble than they're worth. It's easy to confuse complexity with efficacy.

Knowing what an implement is good for will also help you decide whether or not you need it. What purpose does it serve? What gap does it fill? Does it do more than one thing? Do you really need to do that thing? Are there other ways to accomplish that goal without that fancy device?

A large chunk of our time at WildStrong is spent trying to figure out whether or not certain movements or skills are worth the effort. Gill and I will often test out a new movement and ask ourselves, 'Is this a thing?' What's the point of this? How will it help our community improve? We use tyres, slam balls, kettlebells, rocks, branches, sandbags, the ground, trees and our own bodies to explore the world and move. This doesn't mean that we incorporate every possible movement available to us. There are lots of silly tyre, bodyweight or kettlebell movements that don't make the cut. They could be dangerous, overly complicated, of dubious benefit, or simply not the best tool for the job. When you watch a youtube video of the top 30 kettlebell exercises, I can guarantee you fewer than 10 will be worth

including regularly into your classes, and probably the same 3-4 will prove to be killer apps. There's a reason why we'll program bodyweight getups but not star jumps or kettlebell clean and presses but none of those kettlebell flow throw and catch movements.

This brings us to a second important concept: **Return on investment. (ROI)**

ROI doesn't need to just refer to money. We could be thinking about time, effort, skill acquisition, goodwill of a community, trust etc etc. Basically, what is the cost of acquiring/implementing this item/movement and how will it actually benefit you or your community?

Points to consider:

Sometimes this fancy new item is no better than a regular wood dowel or rock. Go find a wooden dowel or a rock instead. (A good example could be lashing wooden spars to trees vs buying an outdoor pull up rig.)

Conversely, sometimes buying is better than building. There are times you're better off buying a piece of kit that costs £60 than you are spending £30 and 5 hours building a DIY version that isn't quite as good. Go ahead and buy the equipment if the DIY option would take up too much of your time.

What is the mental load of introducing this new idea? Is it complicated to learn or teach? Will you have to create buy-in with your community?

Is the complexity or inconvenience adopting this new thing worth the health benefits? Are there actually any unique benefits to this?

Do we actually need to do this new thing? Is this specific movement actually helpful? What's the carry over to real life?

How many of these new things will you need to buy? Does it make sense in a community setting? Often 1 piece of equipment is useless if you're teaching classes of 12 people. Usually, the minimum viable number would probably be 6 items of appropriate size/weight so you can incorporate it into partner or peer coaching work.

Is the main benefit just novelty? Are you guilty of neomania? Do you want a new toy because it looks cool, or will it actually benefit the community?

**Be wary of the cyclical repackaging of old ideas into new products. Be extra skeptical of proprietary branded gadgets; if the idea is good, it will catch on.**

Be wary of amazing claims. Chances are there is an already existing option that will cost you less in the long run.

### **Skepticism and Baloney Detection:**

Carl Sagan, a famous astronomer and science communicator developed a series of heuristics he named a 'Baloney Detection Kit'. It served as a quick tool for evaluating fantastic claims or stories. The original kit can be found [all over the internet](#). I've modified a version that we can apply to equipment, exercise selection and new fitness trends. This version has less emphasis on quantification and scientific literature, but should serve you well.

What is the advantage of this movement or equipment over what you already have access to?

How does this help improve the capabilities and capacities of your members? How will this improve their quality of life or progress them towards their goals? Where does it lead? How are you actually going to use this in a real world setting? Ignore the 30 silly movements and think about the 'killer app'.

Is there a simpler or cheaper option that provides essentially the same benefit?

How did you hear about this? Who else endorses it? Is it being pushed by an influencer or supplement company or is this recommended by reputable sources?

Who has adopted this novelty? Where else have you seen it used? Have you encountered it in the real world? (Seeing an influencer do paid content for a gadget is not the same as seeing respected coaches adopt a new bit of kit in their regular training.)

Does this scale up and down across potential limitations?

Can this novelty scale up to a community level, or will it necessarily be limited due to cost/space? (Can you actually implement this new thing in a group setting or are there prohibitive barriers?)

Does this scale down and up in terms of resistance, intensity, complexity or accessibility?



Is this contextually appropriate? Is it durable and appropriate for outdoor group settings? (Probably doesn't make sense to buy a fleet of electronic treadmills for your outdoor group.)

Is this unnecessarily complex or cool for the sake of being cool? IE Does this look like a cool trick, or will it have carryover to other skills and capabilities?

Are we confusing complexity and specialisation for progress?  
Why would you do X over Y?

Does the cost benefit analysis make sense? Is this significantly more expensive, complicated, dangerous, or intimidating than other similar activities? If so, what is the added benefit?

## **Conclusion: Use what you have and develop skills and capacities over specialised tricks.**

At WildStrong we try not to use too much specialised equipment or chase over specialised feats. We spend a lot of time engaging with the environment around us. There's a lot you can do with just gravity, the ground, and your own body. We do use kettlebells because it's nice to have durable heavy things you can swing around and lift. We like to have access to wooden sticks or dowels and heavy rocks. For a lot of locations, heavy sandbags are a good fit because they're durable and relatively cheap.

A lot of our equipment is just things we see lying around: fallen trees, coppiced spars, old boards and bits of stone. Ultimately, it's just about moving and building broad capabilities in a social environment. Don't get

too caught up in the latest tech or trends. As with most things it's important to be consistent and find something you enjoy doing with people you enjoy spending time with.

## Thank you!

I hope you enjoyed this article.

If you have any questions about anything you've read here, please just drop me an email and I'll get back to you.

All the best,

Andrew

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Andrew holds a Master in Public Health and has over 15 year's experience of coaching, personal training and course development. Andrew holds a lot of sports science certificates, here are some of his favourites: NSCA Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist; Crossfit Level 2; ACE Certified Personal Training qualifications; USAW Olympic Weightlifting; Columbus Weightlifting.