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A place in our hearts

My Sportlady has forged an invaluable place in the lives of women in Munich and beyond. **Ray Algar** reports

This month I want to share the remarkable story of how the My Sportlady independent club based in Munich, Germany, is harnessing its altruistic purpose to forge meaningful connections with members as well as the wider community.

Why feature My Sportlady?

Given that there are more than 48,000 fitness clubs and centres across Europe (source: *EuropeActive*), I'm always fascinated as to why a minority of clubs have a reputation far beyond their operating borders. These days, most clubs typically possess similar resources (skilled people, equipment, facilities, programmes and so on) – globalisation has seen to that – so why does the story and mission of a 2,000-member, women-only club in Germany spread?

A purposeful club

Since Jasmin Kirstein founded the club in 1984, its core purpose – as a special place for women that helps to foster a healthy work-life balance – has remained constant. While budget gyms and boutique studios sprout up around the club, My Sportlady has remained focused on how it can continue to create long-term value, not just for its members but also for women across Munich and beyond.

While possessing all the paraphernalia of other 2,000sq m fitness clubs, it operates more as a centre for cultivating



My Sportlady founder
Jasmin Kirstein
(second from left)

life skills than a typical fitness club. As an example, its cooking school helps members understand the importance of nutrition and healthy eating. The club exists not simply to support a woman's need for physicality, but also to offer her independence, tranquility and acceptance.

Pay what you can afford

Although most people in Munich are now employed, this was not the case during the global financial crisis, and members began coming to the club to cancel their memberships. Kirstein did not believe this was the right thing for her members to be doing – not visiting a club that some had belonged to for many years would just provide more instability in their lives.

IN A NUTSHELL

Project by:	<input type="text"/>
My Sportlady, Germany	
Web:	<input type="text"/>
www.my-sportlady.de	
Charities supported:	<input type="text"/>
Numerous	
Project status:	<input type="text"/>
Ongoing and long-term	
Impact:	<input type="text"/>
Germany and overseas	
Gymtopia keywords:	<input type="text"/>
Clothing and shelter, education, food & nutrition, health & wellbeing	



Member fees are suspended if a user is being treated for an illness

So she decided these members could use the club for free, or simply pay what they could afford until they secured new jobs.

Further compassionate acts are evident when members face serious illness, like cancer. After such a diagnosis, a member typically approaches the club to cancel their membership, believing they will be too unwell to attend. However, My Sportlady waives the membership fee during treatment and encourages the member to visit the club when they believe a visit would be beneficial. Members may visit



During the financial crisis, **Kirstein decided members could simply pay what they could afford until they secured new jobs**



only once in a month, but they know the club is there to support them.

This capacity for a club to simply do what intuitively feels right resonates with all the club's stakeholders. It's one reason why staff say they choose to work at My Sportlady over other clubs. Why? They simply feel immense pride in working for such a compassionate business.

My Sportlady Foundation

A separate not-for-profit organisation was set up in 2009 to co-ordinate the



The Foundation supports projects in Myanmar and Sri Lanka





'Eat for Smart' is one of the Foundation's charitable programmes, offering free nutrition courses at schools and kindergartens across Munich



experience of seeing her young daughter, Anna-Marisas, battle leukaemia. Her daughter made a full recovery, but it left Kirstein with a profound sense of gratitude and perspective. Anna-Marisas went on to pursue a career in nutrition science and now runs the Eat for Smart initiative.

Would this club be missed?

The test of a remarkable club is knowing members, staff and the wider community would genuinely miss it if it were to permanently close – not simply a temporary sense of frustration as an alternative is sourced, but profound disappointment. This special affinity is no random act of good fortune at My Sportlady, but instead the result of a persistent determination to forge a relevant place in the lives of women.

What's your club's story?

Among the ocean of clubs and fitness offers, what is your business doing to stand for something and use its influence to create meaningful change? If you've made a difference, share your story on Gymtopia and see how remarkable things spread. ●

GYMTOPIA – A PLACE WHERE CLUBS DO SOCIAL GOOD

Gymtopia was conceived by founder and chief engagement officer Ray Algar, who believes the global health and fitness industry has enormous influence and potential to do good in the world, beyond its immediate customers.



The idea of Gymtopia is simple: to curate and spread remarkable stories in which the fitness industry uses its influence to reach out and support an external community in need. It was created with the generous support of five organisations: Companhia Athletica, Gantner Technologies, Les Mills, Retention Management and The Gym Group. Gymtopia received an Outstanding Achievement Award in the ukactive Matrix Flame Awards 2014.

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► club's growing philanthropic activities. The Foundation's mission is to help women and children across Germany and overseas.

'Eat for Smart' is one of its programmes, offering free nutrition courses at schools and kindergartens across Munich. This programme is now supported by the local government and health insurers. Other programmes – this time overseas – provide support to orphanages in Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

The rationale for the Foundation is that the business should be more than "just a members' club", using its influence and expertise beyond the walls of the club.

Supporting mums

For the past five years, My Sportlady has been supporting mothers whose children

are receiving cancer treatment at a nearby hospital. The children's hospital is a centre of excellence and so attracts families from across Germany, with the mothers living between the hospital and a nearby hotel. My Sportlady therefore came up with the idea to provide complimentary access to the club. The hospital issues a 'club prescription' which mothers redeem at the club. This allows them precious time to suspend, just for an hour or so, the distress of witnessing a child battle with cancer.

A desire to help others

When trying to understand what motivates a business to put the interest of people before short-term profit, it often helps to look back into the founder's life journey. In Kirstein's case it was the