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## Blurry New Year thinking? Exercise those gray cells!

### Brain fitness programs offer cerebral workouts to hone mental fitness

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Inside Bay Area

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SAN FRANCISCO — Biceps, legs and six pack abs are sure to be on many minds as the calendar year flips and New Year's resolutions are made.

But Alvaro Fernandez, chief executive of San Francisco-based SharpBrains, envisions a time when exercise of the mind will be given just as high a priority as hitting the gym.

Fernandez equates the company he co-founded a year ago to an online brain fitness center that offers a complete workout of the mind.

"It's just like a gym, where you go and there are different machines you can work on," Fernandez said, but instead of workout equipment, <http://www.SharpBrains.com> offers a number of software programs that stimulate the mind.

The company doesn't develop the programs itself, but sifts through products developed by other scientists around the country and makes them centrally available. Each of the products at <http://www.SharpBrains.com> is backed by scientific research, Fernandez said.

Fernandez, who previously launched the online bookstore Bertelsmann Online, brought his Internet expertise to the company, while SharpBrains' other founder, Elkhonon Goldberg, a neurology professor at New York University, brought the medical expertise.

Author of the "Executive Brain," Goldberg believes brainexercises can slow the onset of age-related dementias.

"I believe the mind is every bit as important as the body, and in somecases, more important," Goldberg said. "People need to realize it's important to do whatever we can to try and improve our bodies, even if it's protecting the mind."

The company offers four programs, each with its own purpose.

Two of the programs, RoboMemo and IntelliGym, target a very small niche market, while the others — MindFit and Freeze-Framer Interactive Learning System — can be used by anyone age 6 and up.

RoboMemo is created for people, primarily children, with attention deficit disorder. The program is only distributed through authorized clinical dealers, since it targets a narrow customer base and only those with a medical diagnosis.

IntelliGym, offered for \$99.95, is designed for basketball players, promising to help them develop "game intelligence" skills, such as coordination, attention control, perception and shot selection.

Several college teams, including the University of Memphis Tigers, and individual players have used the program, Fernandez said.

MindFit and Freeze-Framer both touch wider audiences.

MindFit takes the user through a series of exercises to help keep various parts of the brain sharp. One of the exercises shows a photograph, scrambles it up, and challenges the user to determine how many moves it takes to return the picture to the original state.

While the packaging makes it appear as if the program is targeted toward seniors looking to keep their minds sharp, Fernandez said all ages can benefit from the program.

"I personally take it on trips with me and work on it with my laptop on the airplane," he said.

SharpBrains' fourth product, the Freeze-Framer Learning System, is targeted at stress management.

The centerpiece of the program — and the reason it costs \$295 — is a sensor that attaches to the user's earlobe and reads brain waves. The brain waves appear differently on the screen, depending on how relaxed or stressed the user is feeling.

The sensor is paired with activities in a software program that allows the user to develop techniques to relax the mind. One program, for example, features a balloon that floats or sinks based on stress or relaxation levels.

Fernandez acknowledges that cynics might argue that a daily crossword puzzle or brain teaser puzzle could offer a similar experience. SharpBrain, he counters, offers a more complete brain "workout."

The company also offers "brain coaches" who can advise customers on the best workout for the mind. Fernandez returned once again to the gym analogy: "Just like when you walk into a gym, all the tools can be there for a good workout, but unless you have something that shows you what you need and how to do it, it can be confusing," he said.

Fernandez said personal trainers have been quick to embrace the idea of adding mind exercises to a regular regime.

SharpBrain is exploring the possibility of collaborating with gyms, enabling customers to complete a physical workout, then head into a computer room for a mental workout, as well.

"While some of the education community looks at this as some far out, too hard to grasp concept, the physical fitness community completely understands the idea of trying to improve the body," Fernandez said.

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