Fitness by the Bits

Michael Geraci
Pacific University

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Fitness by the Bits

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By Michael Geraci

A new year is upon us and with it comes the annual pledge to improve our physical selves through healthier eating, increased activity and improved sleep habits. A new tech gadget and associated Web service is slated for a January 2009 launch that aims to assist users with all of the above and more. Fitbit got some attention at the annual TechCrunch50 event in September 2008 by being one of the 50 invited technology startups at the conference.

Fitbit consists of a wearable “tracker” device that is kept on your person for any length of time, but is designed to be in place 24/7, and a Web site that provides an individualized fitness portal that utilizes the data collected by the tracker.

The tracker is a sleek, high-tech piece of engineering that looks like an elongated and narrow version of Apple’s impossibly small iPod shuffle. Worn in a clip fashion or just dropped into a pocket, the tracker “senses motion in three-dimensions”, according to the company’s press release. Data monitored by the tracker includes calories burned, steps taken, distance traveled, activity intensity, and sleep quality. The company’s Web site claims that the sleep quality data collection has been fine tuned so as to match data gathered in a clinical sleep lab environment. The tracker uses wireless transmission to send its gathered data to your Mac or Windows computer via a small docking base that also serves as the recharging station for the device. Once sent, the information from the tracker is uploaded to your Fitbit portal on the company’s Web site. The tracker retails for $99 and includes the dock and access to the Web service. There are no on-going fees or dues.

The tracker includes an OLED readout which will provide the user with their expended calorie count, steps taken, distance traveled, as well as an iconic indicator of one’s progress towards fitness goals established on the Web portal. The tracker’s internal battery is reported to have a ten-day use cycle between charges and only needs to be docked for charging (data transfer is
accomplished wirelessly). The tracker is designed to accurately record information from physical motion associated with walking and running but will not be accurate with certain other types of activities such as cycling and swimming. Each tracker has a unique ID so multiple users can be wearing the device in the same location with no complications in the data collection.

The Web site is designed to be a realtime personal health monitor with graphical displays which track your activity levels, calories, steps, sleep patterns, and myriad other pieces of information that reflect your progress towards personal goals such as daily calorie intake and total distance traveled. The Fitbit Web site also includes a clever Web 2.0 hook: the ability to involve your friends in your fitness quests. By adding other Fitbit users to your profile, you can send them updates on your progress and activity levels and receive the same from them. If the company’s screenshots are real (i.e., not mockups) the site will even provide you with statements like the following:

“You got into bed at 12:00am and were in bed for 8 hrs 2 min. You took 23 minutes to fall asleep and woke up 26 times in your sleep. This means you were actually asleep for 7 hrs 42 min.”

I don’t know about you, but this piece of information alone would be enough to motivate me to change some behaviors.

The Web site is designed to become a total picture of one’s health by providing services not connected to the data from the tracker. You can log your non-tracked activities such as rowing or cycling, and you can enter the nutritional information from your meals. The site includes a comprehensive library of food products, both store bought and found in restaurants, and all its nutritional information. As of this writing, this information appears to be open to anyone, not just Fitbit users, and makes a good resource for anyone who is monitoring their eating habits. Currently there is no search functionality or interactivity that would make the nutritional resources even more useful and accessible. For example, the user should be able to select a food item from the library and have it automatically post to his or her Fitbit log on the site. Perhaps this is something that will be added to the site at the official launch.

In conclusion, the Fitbit, once released, appears to offer a convenient and affordable solution to
the keeping of those health-related New Year’s resolutions. At a one-time expense of $99, it seems like a good investment.

**Endnotes**


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