



A top selling Balanced Body Reformer.

The Highest Form of Flattery?

Chris Skinner, Managing Director of HF Industries, has a formidable reputation for protecting the integrity of Balanced Body Pilates equipment. Nigel Benton explores the lengths to which he will go to protect the brand's copyright

There's a saying that to be copied is the highest form of flattery but in today's world of intellectual property, copyright, counterfeits, fraud, fakes, copies, scams and rip offs it can be so difficult to determine what is real and what is not.

In the world of Pilates, it's a certainty that anyone offering or operating true Balanced Body reformers and related equipment in Australia, is providing the authentic brand.

The reason? As the Australian and New Zealand distributor of Balanced Body products, Chris Skinner, Managing Director of HF Industries will enforce the brand's IP by all possible legal means.

Every piece of Balanced Body product worldwide has its own serial number. If it doesn't then its not a Balanced Body product.

With Pilates having a more than century long history - a heritage *Australasian Leisure Management* celebrated in a series of articles in 2020 - over recent years, the movement has grown into a global exercise and wellness phenomenon in the past few decades, and particularly since the pandemic.

In September 2020, fitness technology platform Mindbody revealed that Pilates (along with strength training and yoga) were the most popular exercise classes that consumers wanted to undertake upon returning to facilities in Australia, while in November 2022, business publication Forbes revealed that Pilates was the fastest-growing exercise genre in Australia and New Zealand, experiencing 250% growth in the 12 months to September 2022 - more than 2.8 times that of the next-best genre.



HF Industries' Managing Director Chris Skinner with a warehouse of Balanced Body product.

On top of significant in-home use, Pilates reformers are being offered through physiotherapists, independent studios, franchises - several of whom such as Upstate Studios, KX Pilates, Core Plus and Love Athletica have been highly successful - and fitness clubs and aquatic and recreation centres.

With this growth has come demand for Pilates equipment which, exaggerated by pandemic shipping issues, has sometimes outstripped supply.



Images this page courtesy of Balanced Body.

Return on Investment

As a supplier of Balanced Body equipment since 1996, Chris Skinner has been instrumental in its growth.

However, he explains "as a distributor it's not about just selling a product - you must not only supply and support the equipment, but also show people how to make money.

"What's been established with Reformers is how versatile Pilates is with its traditional usage and as used in group exercise. Group exercise with a Pilates Reformer machine is the reason why we now have groups that are doing 40, 50, 60 some doing 80 classes a week.

"The Reformer has the greatest return of investment that you are ever going to find in a fitness exercise product.

"It's very simple to work out, for the amount of money that you outlay for one of our Reformers you will get a maximum return as opposed to any other piece of equipment. If you are doing an average of 40 classes a week over 45 weeks and you're charging \$20, \$25 a class and you've got 15 machines on your floor, you're getting an annual return of somewhere between \$36,000 to \$45,000 per machine.

"Across those 15 machines, you're making more than \$500,000 a year.

"That's the reason why the Pilates market is so successful here, and the reason why others feel the need to copy.

"At the same time, our product would offer the strongest return for one's investment. For example, a Balanced Body A2 Reformer - which is the most copied - purchased 10 years ago, would sell today in the marketplace for what it was purchased for back then.

"So they're getting a 100% of their money back 10 years down the track. Why? Because of the quality, they know they can still come and get the parts. They can still get the upholstery, they can still get the ropes, they can still get the shoulder pads, simply by quoting their serial number from each unit."

"And that's why those that copy feel the need to use our identity to capture some market share."

As a result, Skinner highlights that while in the USA Balanced Body has just a handful of competitors; in Australia there are more than a dozen suppliers in the marketplace, with products even being sold through Bunnings.

However, while some are legitimate, others deal in counterfeit products.

The Counterfeit Challenge

With this success, Balanced Body has encountered a number of imitators. As innovative manufacturers in many nations know all too well, their innovations are often copied.

As Skinner explains "we encounter direct copies of Balanced Body products - even down to trademarks and branding, that are illegally imported into this country, sometimes by suppliers

importing multiple items and also for use in a single location - using our name, our images and our materials in their promotions.

With suppliers, Skinner notes "they import the machine, hold them in a warehouse and get instructors to go and sell them to people and advertise through different media as Balanced Body product, generally about a thousand dollars under our price. We've got to know who a lot of them are by their boxing and various other means.

"They're the easy ones to make phone calls to, advising them of our position, how we protect Balanced Body's patents and what they need to do.

"But with individual facilities, many have come to us and got a price and then think of how they can get a competitive edge over the rest of the marketplace and go and buy a copy, not wanting to pay the price that we charge.

"In some cases, they know they are buying copies, but some of them actually think that they're buying Balanced Body product at a cheaper price."

As for discovering the copies, Skinner and his team look online every day for products that infringe.

In addition, he states "a lot of discovery comes to us when someone has purchased a copy and they think that it's ours and it's broken down - or they can't find who sold it to them in the first place - and they then need some service.

"When they ring up, we ask 'what's the serial number?', they say there isn't one, so we ask them to send us a photo of the equipment, after which we go back to the inquirer and say 'you've bought a product which is illegal, you've bought a product which has been copied, you do not have Balanced Body product.

"We have no problem with competing against other companies that don't copy our product, don't use our name, don't copy our IP, but those that do, we go after.





When fake Balanced Body products are recovered, Chris Skinner has them destroyed.



Chris Skinner explains "we will not have our patents copied and our name, marketing materials, images and IP used by those looking to take advantage of people or by those looking to get the best deal to take such an advantage". Images this page courtesy of Chris Skinner.

"We've had those who have 'lawyered up' - which ends up costing them considerably more, we have had those that want to negotiate, saying 'we will buy Balanced Body at our next location if we can keep these' and we have people that say they didn't realise the product was counterfeit.

"But it's pretty simple.

"We don't ever discount our product.

"We don't show favouritism to any particular company.

"We supply many of the major fitness and wellness groups and they are all on an equal playing field as far as we are concerned.

"We provide them with different variations and different machines in our range to suit their purposes.

"But to have someone down the road from them who has purchased an illegal product, who promotes themselves as a facility with Balanced Body product, then uses our pictures, our name to try and attract business - that takes business away from the people that have actually come to us and purchased our product.

"We feel we have justification to stop the copies and protect our clients, because our clients are our future and our clients come back and continue to buy from us when they open new studios and facilities.

"They expect us to provide them with service, support and the backing that we've given for 46 years."

Why Australia?

While Balanced Body protects its patents around the world, Australia is at the forefront of the brand's efforts in relation to combatting counterfeiting.

The reason is, unlike many other nations, Australia's love of group exercise.

Skinner explains "while the number one exercise worldwide is dance, the number one exercise in Australia is Pilates reformer classes. That's where it's at. America is starting to catch up. Europe is starting to catch up. We have inquiries coming through our website every day from all over Europe, Singapore, Taiwan are taking off and Korea is strong, but not so in the actual commercial fitness market."

Taking Action

When HF Industries discovers copy Balanced Body equipment, Skinner explains "what we do - depending on where it is - is to notify them they are infringing with illegal product. We ask when they bought the item and who they bought it from. We require them to take down any reference to Balanced Body in the marketing and promotional material.

"Some people are upfront, and forward us the information, while some people try and throw spanners in the works.

"However, in all cases we pursue the buyer, take the counterfeit products away and destroy them."

The whole machine is then destroyed.

"From there it's the buyers choice, they can either come and buy purchase from us and get the proper product, or they can go and buy from one of our competitors - and there's some good competition out there - but they can't buy product that infringes on what we have as protected.

"As we check our systems, we find that 90% of these enquiries, at some point had come to us and got a pricing, which would suggest they knew exactly what you were doing.

"You went and bought someone else's product and whether you knew that it was a fake, infringing or whether you didn't, the simple fact is it's illegal in this country. You can't purchase that product. That product isn't allowed to be brought in.

"So, we need to go after the people that brought it in, the people that manufactured it, which means yes, we go into countries like China who have copied our products.

"We go after them and whatever they've brought into Australia and New Zealand and take the product out of the market.

"Some people who have bought the copied product say they've sold it on or say, 'we're going to give it away to our instructors'. Well, that again is illegal they can't give it away to anyone and they can't sell it to anyone.

"There are only two areas for us.

"One, our protection and two our client's protection.

"The people that have spent the money and paid to get our product deserve to be supported. They are the ones being ripped off.

"Competition is one thing, stealing and using another's identity to try and gain an advantage, needs to be stamped out."

Who pays the price?

Skinner concludes "those that purchase such copies, they are the ones that are going to lose most.

"They are the ones who have been conned, who will lose at least twice and possible everything.

"My best advice, if you are looking for Balanced Body product, look for a serial number. If it's not being offered by HF Industries or if the serial number is not there, it's not Balanced Body and if you do buy something else, please do not use our name or images." **ALM**