

Companies, Individuals Bet on Incentives to Lose Weight

WELLNESS: Social Dieting Gains Traction And Some HR Critics

By TOM YORK

After weighing in at 222 pounds last year, Encinitas resident **Simon Menkes** realized he had to get thinner. He was beginning to suffer from health issues related to his obesity.

At first, he tackled the challenge of weight loss on his own but met with limited success. Then Menkes signed up to participate in an incentive program to lose more at weight reduction website **Healthywage.com**.

The Sorrento Valley corporate controller bet \$200 of his own money each month that he could lose 45 pounds in six months.

If he met his goal, he would win up to a couple thousand dollars in cash. If he didn't, he would lose the \$1,200.

Menkes met his goal — and won the bet, eventually dropping to 149 pounds.

For his efforts, he received \$1,920 in cash, as well as earning the satisfaction of being lighter and healthier.

"It was very stressful," he said of the process, "Especially toward the end."

He said he had to wrap himself inside a plastic garbage bag to generate sweat and work out vigorously the last two days before the deadline to lose the final two pounds.

"But I did it, and now I feel like a million dollars," he said.

Menkes has joined the tens of thousands who have taken to cash-incentive websites to find motivation to lose weight.

Jamie Scott Lytle
Simon Menkes is one of a growing number of people who have used a social dieting site as motivation for improving health.



It's a slice of market that has grown since the New York City-based Healthywage first went online six years ago. Competitors include **DietBet** and **FatBet.Net**, which lets friends and co-workers make wagers on how much weight they can lose.

The sites are trying to muscle their way into a \$30 billion a year industry that includes the likes of **WeightWatchers**, in which **Oprah Winfrey** acquired a 10 percent share last month, and Carlsbad's **Jenny Craig**, which Swiss food giant **Nestle SA** acquired in 2006 for \$600 million.

Fidelity Investments and the **National Business Group on Health** recently released the results of a survey of 121 large companies, which found that 95 percent of U.S. employers offer some

sort of wellness program, which can include incentives and prizes for losing weight, Fidelity said.

Odds in Their Favor

Jimmy Fleming, who co-founded **Healthywage.com** with **David Roddenberry** in 2009, said research has shown that workers are three times more likely to lose weight by making a bet on the ordeal.

The **Healthywage** site now has close to 600 corporate clients nationwide, with active participation from businesses and individuals in San Diego, said Fleming.

Social dieting companies make money from fees to set up corporate programs and also from losing bets. Many consumers appear to be content to lose some

weight even if they do not win their bet.

Fleming said the business has grown 150 percent per year over six years.

"We have disproportionate participation from San Diego," said Fleming. "You have good weather all year round with a very active population. And it's a place where people like a challenge."

Dropping 10 Million Pounds

More than 200,000 consumers have participated in various challenge programs at the site so far this year, dropping 10 million pounds in the process.

Fleming said his site runs three-month, six-month and one-year challenges, including a challenge for \$10,000 in cash prizes that ends Jan. 22.

So far this year, the site's paid out more \$2.5 million through the various cash rewards-based weight loss programs.

"One of the reason we're in the business is to have a social impact, to make a change," he said.

He said he knows the weight loss claimed is valid because each participant's weight is verified at the beginning of the wager and at the end.

"We know how much weight people have lost. We have thousands of success stories from people who have provided before and after photos to prove what they've done."

A Losing Proposition

But not everyone is so sure that betting against one's weight loss is a good thing.

Alisa Guralnick, a North County human resource consultant, thinks the idea of paying employees to lose weight

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