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Web co. targets weight loss: Hub start-up spurs dieting

By Jerry Kronenberg
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Aaron Day helps corporations firm up their bottom lines - literally.

"Our goal is to get as many people as possible to a healthy weight," said Day, whose Boston start-up Tangerine Wellness Inc. creates diet-and-exercise systems for employee-health programs.

Founded in 2004, Tangerine designs Web-based weight-loss programs for firms trying to promote worker health - and reduce company health-insurance costs.

The twist: Employees compete to see who loses the most weight, with workers getting cash prizes whenever they shed pounds.

"We think it's very important to provide rewards for results," said Day, whose firm chose its name because tangerines are good for you and have a healthy-looking color.

So far, Tangerine's clients like what they see.

"I'm convinced that we save at least twice (what Tangerine charges) through lower health-care claims," said Jim Knutson of Illinois auto-parts maker Rockford Acromatic Products.

Rockford hired Tangerine in January, learning at an initial employee weigh-in that 71 percent of its workers were overweight.

That's down to 62 percent today - and participating workers have lost more than six pounds each on average.

"It's really turned into a program that everybody's gotten involved with," said Knutson, who's dropped 13 pounds himself.

Tangerine's system combines online tools, cash rewards and team spirit to whip workers into shape.

When a company first signs on, Tangerine holds a kickoff weigh-in, promoting the event to workers with posters reading: "Lose Weight, Earn Money."

The Boston start-up sets teams up to maximize competitiveness - pitting, say, one department against a hated rival.

Web-based tutorials give diet and exercise tips, while daily e-mails tell each person how they and their team are faring.

An online meal-and-exercise tracker has calorie counts for hundreds of foods, including offerings from the company cafeteria and popular nearby restaurants.

Tangerine's basic philosophy: Any time you burn 3,500 calories more than you consume, you'll lose one pound.

Once a quarter ends, Tangerine weighs workers a second time, then hands out cash to those who've slimmed down.

Bonuses vary based on a company's budget and average salaries.

At Rockford, the three-person team that drops the most weight splits \$135.

Participants also get individual awards: \$5 just for signing up, as well as another \$4 for every 1 percent a person's weight falls.

Day admits those sums aren't princely, "but it's like penny poker - there's excitement, plus the fact that you're keeping score."

A 30-year-old who dropped out of college in 1995 to start his first company, Day hit on the idea for Tangerine while dieting in 2001.

Approaching 350 pounds, the entrepreneur wrote a computer program to log how many calories he consumed and expended - and to predict how the difference would affect his physique.

Day tracked his weight fluctuations with a bathroom scale "and (the software) turned out to be completely accurate."

Two years later and 100 pounds lighter, Day was reading about the growing U.S. obesity epidemic and "a lightbulb went off in my head. I thought: 'Nobody has ever brought the Web into this problem, or empowered employees to deal with it.'"



Hub-based Tangerine Wellness CEO Aaron Day helps companies cut the number of overweight workers. (Staff photo by Lisa Hornak)

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He quickly founded Tangerine with Austin Chang and Bill Walsh, two Boston-based buddies from earlier startups.

Today, the three work out of their homes, as do some 27 other Tangerine workers in New York, Chicago and Houston.

The company currently has about a dozen clients, each paying about \$4 per employee per month for weight-reduction help.

Tangerine gets new business by offering prospects 30-day free trials, using small test groups that often include a company's CEO.

With venture-capital backing and an advisory board that includes former U.S. Sen. Bill Bradley, Day sees Tangerine's future as bright.

Noting that experts predict 75 percent of Americans will soon be overweight, Day said: "I can't think of very many markets that are that vast."

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