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Week of March 26, - April 1, 2004



Finding its Weigh

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After starting out without much of a focus, nutritional counseling firm The Healthy Weigh has zeroed in on a formula for a fit bottom line

BY ALLISON WILLIAM
HOUSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

The owner of Houston-based The Healthy Weigh has found that when it comes to a business plan, trimmer is better.

Indeed, what started out as a broad business offering personal training, counseling for cancer patients and whatever else it took to get clients in the door, now focuses specifically on nutritional counseling, eating disorders and sports nutrition.

"I've learned that you should do one thing and you should do it well," says Caryn Honig, founder of The Healthy Weigh.

Honig says specializing solely on counseling clients with eating disorders has allowed the company to become well-respected and trusted by local therapists, physicians and hospitals and has helped get The Healthy Weigh name out in the public.

Honig says a large portion of the company's clients come from referrals, which is why she makes it a priority to establish a working relationship with local physicians.

She often takes lunch to local doctor's offices and sits down with the nurses to explain her services. Honig has also developed relationships with local coaches to offer guidance to athletes in need of nutritional advice or counseling for eating disorders.

Honig also makes a point to write articles for fitness and wellness magazines and to lecture at local schools, hospitals and community events.

The entrepreneur regularly distributes a newsletter to about 500 clients and physicians in an effort to keep the company fresh on the minds of potential and existing clients.

The Healthy Weigh also hosts an annual eating disorder conference called Beautiful Me and invites renowned national speakers to share their expertise with attendees.

"Anything we can do to get our name out there in the appropriate manner helps," says Honig.

The conference posted modest results during its first year. But last year, Beautiful Me garnered \$10,000 from several prominent sponsors, including the well-known Menninger Clinic, which recently relocated to Houston.

Honig believes community exposure through events such as Beautiful Me and the company's strong relationship with the local medical community are two main factors for The Healthy Weigh's success.

In 2000, The Healthy Weigh saw 192 new patients and brought in \$121,142 in revenue. Last year, the company treated an additional 184 patients and generated \$151,420 in revenue.

The company has already seen 52 new patients so far this year.

MAKING ORDER FROM DISORDER

Honig, who suffered from an eating disorder for 10 years, says she chose to narrow the company's focus to what she does best, after lying awake many nights wondering if she gave the right advice to patients early in her career.

"I never had good treatment while I was suffering," she says. "After I saw a dietitian who helped me a lot, I knew that this was what I wanted to do. It was my passion."

Honig began her career as the first full-time staff dietitian at Texas Children's Hospital.

She left the hospital in 1998 to go out on her own. To make ends meet, Honig made house calls for \$25 an hour, providing personal training and nutrition services seven days a week.

She later set up a one-room office equipped with donated furniture and a phone. From there, Honig offered personal training and dietitian expertise to clients throughout the day, often switching back and forth from gym gear to professional busi-

THE HEALTHY WEIGH

FOUNDER: Caryn Honig
ESTABLISHED: 1998
2003 REVENUE: \$151,420
EMPLOYEES: 4
WEB SITE: www.thehealthyweighinc.com



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ness suits.

The hard work paid off, and Honig garnered 68 clients by the end of her first year in operation.

The business has since moved into a historic house in the River Oaks area, located at 2801 Bammel. Honig believes the "homey" atmosphere allows her clients to relax.

Although she never worried about failing, Honig took out a \$10,000 Small Business Administration loan early on to give the company a "little cushion."

"I wouldn't pay myself if it came down to it," she says. "Failure was never an option. I'm a risk-taker."

Meanwhile, The Healthy Weigh has also secured contracts from several area hospitals, providing fill-in personnel for gaps in hospital staffing.

The Healthy Weigh is on call with two area hospitals. The company's four-person staff fills in for three additional hospitals and one local doctor's office.

In such a personal profession, Honig says she sometimes has trouble hiring employees that have as much passion for helping people as she does.

"I made a mistake in the early years of trusting people too quickly and being too generous," she says. "It's been a challenge to find reliable employees with a strong work ethic."

Honig says she now makes the hiring and firing process a team decision instead of hiring an employee on the spur-of-the-moment.

She has also made it a rule not to hire former clients.

"These people see us for such a long time and they form relationships with us, so it's hard not to help them out with work," says Honig. "But we've done it in the past, and it just doesn't seem to work out."

Honig also made the decision early on not to accept health insurance as a method of payment for her services.

She accepted insurance in the beginning, but found that the mounds of paper work and numerous late payments were just too much of a hassle for a small business to handle.

Indeed, Lynn Grefe, CEO of the National Eating Disorders Association, says the field of treating eating disorders is wide open for professionals interested in entering the market, but she says the problem is convincing health plans to cover the care.

"Rich people aren't the only ones with eating disorders," says Grefe. "I know of people who are getting a second mortgage or using all of their retirement sav-

ings to pay for treatment for their children."

Grefe estimates it costs about \$25,000 a month for in-patient treatment of an eating disorder.

A WEIGHTY ISSUE

Honig says the Houston area is underserved when it comes to the treatment of patients with eating disorders.

Indeed, in the United States, conservative estimates indicate that 5 million to 10 million girls and women and as many as 1 million boys and men are struggling with eating disorders, according to the National Eating Disorders Association.

Honig says there is a lot of confusion in the weight loss industry about quick-fix diets and miracle pills.

The Healthy Weigh takes a behavioral approach to weight management, including meal planning. Honig says she makes a point to tell all clients up front that success will be accomplished only by way of a long process.

Honig has avoided advertising in mainstream publications because she fears she'll receive hundreds of calls from people confusing the business with a traditional weight loss program, such as Weight Watchers.

In fact, she just recently hired a public relations firm to market the company to specific, appropriate media.

Honig says so-called "nutritionists" cause confusion in the weight loss industry because they dispense advice without any training or licensing.

"There's a huge difference between dietitians and nutritionists," she says. "Anybody can be a nutritionist. It takes a lot of time and continuing education classes to work as a licensed dietitian."

Ronda Elsenbrook, a dietitian with The Healthy Weigh, says the company will eventually consider adding therapists and counselors to the staff, which is now made up of four dietitians.

Additional goals include gaining more exposure in the community and possibly adding in-patient services down the road.

"We've grown comfortably throughout the years, and the need for our services in this city is so great that there is a tremendous potential for growth," Elsenbrook says. ■