



Weight-loss trade trims expectations

» JILL STARK

A new year: a new you. It's the diet industry's perennial catch cry. But as obesity rates continue to climb, weight-loss companies are rebranding their message.

Weight management is being sold as a "life service" – which once would have been anathema to an industry built on the lure of the quick fix. There is now open acknowledgement it can take repeated attempts at their programs to see results.

And while reaching your "goal weight" was once the slimmer's holy grail, Jenny Craig and Weight Watchers say it's no longer about fitting into that bikini – it's about getting healthy. Drop as little as 5 per cent of your body weight and you can reduce the risk of heart disease, cancer and diabetes.

Dietician Rosemary Stanton is not surprised at the new path the industry is taking.

"It probably reflects the fact that people are now not just a few kilos overweight, but a high percentage of Australians are obese or morbidly obese," Stanton said.

"I think the weight-loss companies are starting to see that there's so many of those people that they have to adapt their message to make the goal more attainable."

But she was concerned the slimming world was legitimising yo-yo dieting.

"What concerns me is the idea that it's normal to go up and down in

your weight. A new study a few weeks ago showed that from a health perspective people who repeatedly lose weight and put it back on would have been better off staying fat."

Stanton, who was once a consultant for Weight Watchers until it became "too commercial", also questions whether it and other weight-loss companies are now more focused on getting customers to buy their range of convenience foods than helping people slim. This was creating dependent consumers, she said.

"I hear people say all the time, 'I went on Jenny Craig or Weight Watchers and lost weight', but they're hugely fat now and they just think, 'I'll do it again'," she said.

The chief executive of Jenny Craig, Amy Smith, dismisses the criticism and says the shift in the marketing message is not an admission of failure, but recognition of how hard it is to lose weight and keep it off.

"You have to look at it as a life service," she said. "It's like taking your car in once a year for a tune-up. Some people will come back several times, but we have to accept on the basis of the statistics – a third of Australian adults and a quarter of our children are overweight – that weight loss isn't a straight line; there are humps and bumps along the way.

"That doesn't mean people attempting it who experience [weight] regain have failed. So in that sense, yes we have reframed the marketing of what success means."

By adopting a more realistic

approach to weight loss and focusing on peer support, lifestyle change and nutritional education, Jenny Craig and Weight Watchers maintain they set themselves apart from the "charlatans" that thrive in a \$790-million-a-year diet industry. Weight Watchers this month lobbied the federal government for \$115 million in subsidies to allow publicly funded access to its programs.

Jenny Craig has made a similar pitch to government, arguing it offers a scalable national response to the obesity crisis. Some health experts have cautioned government against funding commercial enterprises, which have strong ties to the food industry. In 2010, Jenny Craig's Australia and New Zealand arm was bought by Nestle – which makes Smarties, Kit Kat and Allen's lollies. Weight Watchers New Zealand recently partnered with McDonald's to produce a range of healthy meals. The links prompted the Obesity Policy Coalition to accuse junk food companies of making their customers fat and then selling them the cure.

But how many people who sign up to these programs regain the weight and return for another attempt?

Neither Weight Watchers nor Jenny Craig were able to provide data on how many times, on average, their clients repeat the programs.

The managing director of Weight Watchers Australasia, Joseph Saad, said it was not uncommon, particu-





larly for women who regained weight at menopause or after having children, to come back, but that did not equate to yo-yo dieting.

“It’s OK for people to give smoking cessation a go but not everyone can quit first time, and we’re no different to that,” he said. “Ultimately, does it really matter when you get to the prize of losing weight if it took three or four attempts?”

Saad says Weight Watchers has more than 70 clinical trials that detail the approach’s efficacy, including one showing that five years after completing the program the majority of people have kept more than half of the weight they lost off.

Rachel Allworth, 38, tried Weight Watchers, Lite ‘n’ Easy, Tony Ferguson’s meal replacements, the hip and thigh diet and a soup diet in an attempt to shift weight from her 164-centimetre, 80-kilogram frame.

“I would lose some weight and I’d think I’ll try and do it myself and then the kilos would pile back on,” Allworth, of Padstow Heights, said.

She joined Michelle Bridges’s 12-Week Body Transformation program in February. This incorporates exercise plans, nutritional lessons and motivational videos.

Now she is 58kg and training for a half marathon.

“I never exercised before this, and when I joined I started with walking,” she said. “As I got faster I

started running and I love it. I’m eating healthier as well. I’ve set goals in ways other programs have never taught me to.” with Esther Han



‘Weight loss isn’t a straight line, there are humps and bumps along the way.’ Amy Smith, Jenny Craig