



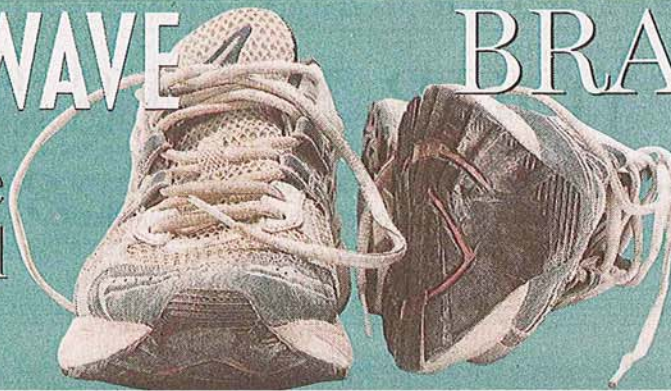
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CANADA'S BUSINESS VOICE, FRIDAY, AUGUST 6, 2010

Running Room and Weight Watchers build community of consumers

Brands run together

BY HOLLIE SHAW

As the most entrenched of brands expose themselves to consumers on a widening array of media platforms, it's no wonder like-minded corporations are teaming up to give each other pats on the back through cross-marketing.

Running Room Ltd., which runs ongoing clinics teaching consumers of all fitness levels how to run, and **Weight Watchers International Inc.**, which runs ongoing support meetings encouraging members to embrace healthy lifestyle changes, recently teamed up for a marketing alliance expected to last for several years.

"Informally, we always recommended Weight Watchers to customers trying to lose weight," explained John Stanton, the once-pudgy smoker turned running evangelist who opened the first Running Room in 1984 in Edmonton and now operates 93 of the retail stores in Canada and eight in the United States.

The two companies share ideological similarities, he said, in that they both want to promote their businesses through a community of consumers who form a support system in trying to make lifestyle changes together. In June, the businesses launched the Weight Watchers Walk-It Challenge, aimed at persuading Canadians to set a goal of walking five kilometres. More than 7,000 signed up to participate in the nationwide walk, and the companies are making it an annual event.

It comes as the percentage of obese Canadian adults came close to doubling between 1978 and 2005, when 35% of Canadian adults were overweight, according to Statistics Canada, and 24% were obese.

"Most people are coming in for weight control with a specific goal," Mr. Stanton said. "What we find is that people stay because of the sense of community. It is about engaging the customers to help each other, whether it's the Running Room or Weight Watchers."

Peer support is key among novices, he believes. "Some of our success in mobilizing Canada is through a gentle, sustainable [philosophy] rather than the old school: Run fast [and] run hard, or else go home. And people just go home, they often eat nachos."

That could be doubly true for an increasingly aging and sedentary population, who might be facing the biggest obstacle to exercising that Mr. Stanton has gleaned from years of formal and



Running Room founder John Stanton at the chain's Beaches location in Toronto. "Most people are coming in for weight control with a specific goal," he says. "What we find is that people stay because of the sense of community."

TIM FRASER FOR NATIONAL POST

informal research: fear.

"When I was a 238-pound smoker, every morning I would go out when it was still dark so people wouldn't see me running," said Mr. Stanton, who runs the business with his two sons, Jason and John.

In addition to the first annual five-kilometre co-branded walk on June 23, the marketing deal included a promotion giving new Weight Watchers members a \$40 gift package from Running Room, including a gift card discount on Running Room clinics. The Running Room is giving out \$20 discounts to join Weight Watchers through the fall.

"We are reaching what we see as the perfect target group that the Weight Watchers brand would appeal to," said Susan Yorke, vice-president of marketing at Weight Watchers Canada. "It is a much

more personal way and a stronger way [to promote the brand] than buying TV or print [ads]."

Such goodwill marketing could work well for a retail industry increasingly focused on value in the form of customer service, personalization and good word-of-mouth among consumers.

"I am still the face of the company [and] people like that," Mr. Stanton said. "If you have a problem with us you can email me or call me, and I will respond to you. I pick up my phone." In addition, all employees run or walk regularly. "They live [the philosophy] ... they can talk to you about your training."

Sarah Johnson, principal at Toronto-based Athena Brand Wisdom, says such alliances between brands from different corporate families are becoming more commonplace in a market saturated

with consumer messaging.

"Brands are trying to find ways to be relevant to consumers and fit into their lives in more than one way," she said. "This appeals to different sides of [customers' lives] in a more profound way than very traditional, narrow advertising."

The group element also helps boost sales, said Wendy Evans, a Toronto-based retail consultant.

"For a retailer that synergy and group dynamic is great merchandising," she said. "[Walking and running groups] meet at the store and come back to the store, you get a discount on all kinds of items [related to what you are doing] and people run on the streets all across Canada wearing Running Room shirts."

Having a community of runner customers "is like having a focus group every week," added

Mr. Stanton, who said several retail items were inspired by customer suggestions, including a toque with a ponytail holder and a toque that dips down to cover the earlobes.

Indeed, Running Room's community model proved to be so popular that Lululemon borrowed the idea for its yoga business, which has now branched into selling running gear.

As for competition in the market, Mr. Stanton said his company will "continue to do what we have always done and try to do it better." He said the business still has room to grow in Canada. "We still have a got a fair amount of room for growth [in Quebec] because it was the market to open last. And there are a lot of smaller cities that we could be in that we are not in."

Financial Post

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