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Switch2Health: Getting consumers active away from computers...using computers

Technology Entrepreneur Seth Tropper M.S. '98 embarks on a new venture

By Mary Ann Farley

Special to the Stevens News Service

Obesity. The problem is everywhere and only getting worse across all age groups. And a lot of money is being spent by everyone—consumers, the government and pharmaceutical companies—to curb it. There are pills, diets, warnings, food pyramids—even programs where calorie-correct prepared meals are delivered right to your doorstep—but few ideas seem to be stemming the growing numbers of obese adults and children.

Why? According to Seth Tropper, president and CEO of Switch2Health Corp. (S2H), warning people that bad things will happen if they don't lose weight doesn't have much effect. But what if they were rewarded for their weight-reduction, calorie-burning activities?

Using the "rewards" concept that has become so popular with airlines and credit cards, Switch2Health is Tropper's new company, whereby consumers wear a wristband with a sensor that measures their activity level, which in turn earns them rewards points that they redeem via a web site.

If you tell someone to exercise or else they'll get ill, they might comply," he says, "but if you tell them that if they get active they'll get an iPod—well, that's turning things around a bit."

Switch2Health, which Tropper created two years ago with partner Amado Batour (a 2006 Stevens masters graduate), did a "soft launch" of its first wristband in August to 1,000 Stevens students, along with some other schools and companies. S2H will eventually be selling two types of wristbands, geared towards two different markets.

The first, now in use at Stevens, is a single-use device targeted for interactive promotions; the second is a similar product but may be used for a year, and is therefore targeted for sustainable health and wellness programs.

The initial wristbands, called "Kinetic Coupons," are programmed to quantify physical activity in terms of hours. When participants reach a certain level, a code is then revealed, which the customer registers on S2H.com. At that point, they redeem their points for rewards from various businesses and sponsors.

"The rewards would be very different depending on the promotion," says Tropper. "If Stevens is doing it, the rewards might be sweatsuits or t-shirts. In the future, larger companies, like those who sell office supplies or athletic wear, could possibly give millions of wristbands away while offering their own rewards."

Tropper says the single-use device could be disposable, but also collectible, depending upon the graphics and the program for which it is deployed. The sustainable device would be more like the "Livestrong" band that people wear everyday as a symbol of a cause. It will also tell the time and date, in addition to measuring physical activity.

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Both wristbands are like a “billboard” on the wrist, says Tropper, and can be used not to just stimulate physical activity, but also promote an event or cause, like breast cancer.

“As the second device can measure a year’s worth of activity,” Tropper says, “a healthcare company could give it to its employees, then use our web site as a rewards platform, or they could create their own rewards, which could simply be recognition or perhaps a day off. Of course, their overall objective is to have a healthier workforce, reduce healthcare costs, and increase productivity.”

Tropper says his preparation to create a company like Switch2Health came from his training at Stevens, where he founded a company called PlasmaSol as part of his executive masters program. (He graduated in 1998.) He built the company (which licensed Stevens’ technology), then sold it three years ago to Stryker Medical, with Stevens as a major shareholder.

In January of 2006, he and Batour financed the idea for Switch2Health to see if there was any interest in such a technology. They went on to develop the product for the next 18 months, which led up to the soft launch this past August.

“What you go through mentally and financially in creating a company like this is a huge risk and drain,” he says. “For the first year and a half, we didn’t take a salary, and were living off our bank accounts and side jobs. From a personal perspective, having a family with young kids, my wife and I have always had to be asking ourselves,—‘Do we downsize? When is it time to put this aside and support the family?’ What we agreed upon is to have short-term milestones.”

A resident of Marlboro, N.J., with an office in North Brunswick, Tropper projects that in 2009, the company “will turn black.”

“You really need the support of your family to do something like this,” he says. “What’s great is that my kids and their friends are all wearing the bands now, and are creating a buzz around town.”

Tropper credits Stevens with giving him the tools and confidence to stick with his vision. “I’m a huge advocate of Stevens,” he says. “Every day I say that it feels like I never left that program. Everything I’m doing today is an extension of it. I just happen to be working in the corporate world instead of an academic one.”

He notes that creating, operating, then selling PlasmaSol completely prepared him for the creation of Switch2Health. “Everything we’re going through with this company is what we went through in the graduate program,” he says. “What we’re doing now is truly a great testament to Stevens.”

Tropper says he actually met Batour at Stevens, who was also doing graduate work (and who is the one who came up with the idea of rewarding physical activity). Before they began working on their technology, they spent their first year working together researching obesity. They looked at the major issues surrounding the problem and what was being done to address them.

“We found that there’s a deep concern out there about obesity, and that it’s a continuing issue,” he says. “What we have so far are a couple of decades of failed attempts to tackle this problem.

“An awful lot of money has been spent to curb obesity in the U.S.” he adds, “but instead of telling people to be active, Switch2Health provides motivation, incentives and a rewards platform to get people using our technology.”

Tropper and Batour's research also included a review of all existing technology to create the wristband they had in mind. "We found nothing out there that had the cost and functionality we wanted, so we developed our own sensor, for which there's a patent pending," he says. "It's a kinetic sensor that we put inside these products."

He notes that with so many children sitting in front of video games these days, using a computer to get them outside and playing is a novel idea.

"Not only will they earn status in the gaming world by how much activity they do," he says, "but by playing outdoors, they'll then get rewards in the virtual world that they couldn't get otherwise."

The cost of abundance

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, an estimated 300,000 deaths each year in the United States are attributed to obesity. The economic cost of obesity in the U.S. was approximately \$117 billion in 2000, and is considered an epidemic both nationally and worldwide.

According to national data analyzed in 2002, it is estimated that 65 percent of Americans (61 million adults) are now overweight or obese.

As for childhood obesity, the increase over the last three decades is staggering. Obese children stay obese, meaning if a child is obese at age 6, there is a 50 percent chance of life-long obesity. If a child is obese at age 13, there is a 75 percent chance of life-long obesity.

The reason for obesity is an imbalance in energy intake and expenditure. Children are currently less active than ever, with the widespread availability of TV, videos, computers and video games. Nationwide, 22.6 percent of children do not participate in any type of physical activity outside of school hours.

What children eat is also a problem. Only 2 percent of U.S. children and youth (ages 2 to 19) eat the recommended five servings of fruits and vegetables per day. Yet 30 percent consume fast foods daily, which are typically high in fat content and are oversized.

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