
Section 4

DO WHAT YOU LOVE

Weight Watchers

Stop eating chocolate cookies,
start building a business

IN 1961, NEW YORK HOUSEWIFE JEAN NIDETCH WAS thirty-eight, weighed 195 pounds, and described herself, her bus-driver husband, her two sons, her poodle, and most of her friends as overweight. A “When are you due?” question tipped Nidetch over the edge and she decided to do something about her ballooning weight. She began her battle to overcome an addiction to chocolate cookies, which she would eat by the packet, and took herself to the New York City Department of Health obesity clinic for a diet plan.

Months later, Nidetch invited a group of six “fat friends” around for coffee and announced that she had lost forty pounds, challenging them to get with her program. The group began meeting regularly: Nidetch would hand out diet sheets and everyone would assess their weekly progress. Two months later, they all chipped in and bought some scales. “We weren’t going to blame our genes, our hormones, or our mothers anymore,” says Nidetch. Demand was huge. Soon there weren’t enough chairs or space in her apartment.

Al Lippert, an overweight buyer for a coat company, and his wife, Felice, heard about Nidetch’s meetings and invited her to their home for a meeting. As well as quickly starting to lose weight (one of the Lipperts’ sons had described his parents as being “like two beach balls”), the Lipperts immediately saw the business potential in these meetings.

Nidetch and the Lipperts hatched a plan at the Lipperts’ kitchen table for an enterprise they called Weight Watchers. They would

run weekly motivational, empathetic meetings and charge a fee. The biggest risk was a month's rent on a space above a cinema in Little Neck, Queens. Being a woman, Nidetch could not sign the lease, so her husband (whom she later divorced) had to sign it.

The first commercial Weight Watchers meeting was held in 1963. The company charged \$2 per person, per session, the same price as a movie ticket at the time. After the first meeting, Nidetch recalls stuffing more money than she had ever seen in her life into her bags. Within a year they were selling Weight Watchers franchises. The business expanded through a system where franchisees paid a few thousand dollars for a license and agreed to pay 10 percent of their revenues back to Nidetch and the Lipperts. Within three years turnover reached \$160,000, and by 1970 turnover was \$8 million.

With the combination of Al Lippert's business administration and marketing prowess, Felice's writing and support skills, and Nidetch's natural leadership, motivation, and speaking skills, Weight Watchers was the perfect way to make money at a time when the post-war generations were packing on the pounds. Nidetch was the "Energizer bunny," Al was the marketing genius, and Felice the creative force.

In 1978, the Lipperts and Nidetch sold the company to H.J. Heinz for \$72 million. The deal was so smooth, Al Lippert has boasted that lawyers and accountants were not involved in the process. Heinz sold the business to European investment firm Artal Luxembourg in 1999, and today the company is worth \$4.8 billion. There are more than 46,000 weekly Weight Watchers meetings in thirty countries around the world, with sixty million people attending meetings in 2004. Until 1997, the Weight Watchers regime had been based on a simple points system, but now two different food plans are available. One plan involves points; the other doesn't. Meetings cost more than a movie ticket these days, but the results of Weight Watchers programs speak for themselves—an estimated 78 percent of people who regularly attend Weight Watchers keep the

weight off. Attendances continue to rise as the obesity epidemic continues to spread across the Western world, with more than one billion people around the world now considered to be overweight.

Al Lippert died in South Africa in 1998, after a day of golf. Felice Lippert died of lung cancer in 2003. Nidetch lives in Las Vegas and is a generous philanthropist. Nidetch says that once she learned how to stop eating chocolate cookies, she could set her mind to achieving anything. For the once overweight housewife, the business was never about the money: “I’d do this for nothing on a street corner,” she once declared.

NOTES

“**We weren’t going to . . .**” Smith, Lyrysa. “Weight Watchers Turns 40,” *The Times Union*, 4.29.03, p. D1.

“**Like two beach balls . . .**” Lippert, Felice. Obituaries, *The Express*, 4.1.04, p. 34.

“**Energizer bunny . . .**” Sajbel, Maureen. “Been There, Ate That,” *InStyle*, 6.97, p. 170.

“**I’d do this for . . .**” *PR Newswire*, 8.18.81 p 1.

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Quiksilver

Don’t underestimate surfer dudes

ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE LATE 1960S, TWO SURFER DUDES were living the good life around the legendary surf spot Bells Beach near Torquay in southern Australia. In between surfing sessions, beers, and tins of baked beans, Alan