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Devoted To Diabetics

Afflicted Himself, Marketer Creates TV Show To Educate, Inspire Others Who Have The Disease

By JANICE PODSADA - Courant Staff Writer

WESTPORT — After a long career as the owner of a nationally recognized marketing agency, Howard Steinberg, 48, sold his company and went in search of self.

“Self,” in this case, included life with diabetes for more than three decades, from the time he was 10 years old and determined to hide his disease.

Reflecting on his condition, he realized he wasn't alone. Twenty million Americans have Type 1 or Type 2 diabetes, and every day another 2,200 people are diagnosed with the disease. In 2005, those same Americans spent \$92 billion on prescription drugs, medical devices and special foods and clothing.

Steinberg, the man with diabetes, saw their struggles. Steinberg, the marketing executive, saw their pocketbooks. “No one had looked at them as a consumer group,” Steinberg said.

Here was an opportunity to educate, inspire and connect to a group of consumers that are as eager to learn about the latest products as those whose tastes run to cooking, sailing or parenting.

But one feature was noticeably absent — an iconic brand name. Talk about folks over 50 and invariably, AARP gets mentioned. Talk about teenagers, and at some point MTV pops into the conversation. Diabetes had no such association.

With that insight, Steinberg in 2004 founded dLife — For Your Diabetes Life!, with \$18 million in funds raised from private investors and venture capitalists. The privately owned, multimedia company dLife, and its parent company, LifeMed Media Inc., are based in Westport. The focus? Everything diabetes. Type 1, Type 2 and “Type 3s” — Steinberg's term for friends and family who live with or care for people with diabetes.

Although nonprofit groups, such as the American Diabetes Association, provide funds for advocacy and medical research, Steinberg acknowledges that his company's goals aren't as lofty.

“We provide the daily informational and inspirational component. We don't raise money for research,” he said. “We raise money from our corporate sponsors.”

Steinberg hopes to turn dLife into a brand that's as recognizable to its audience as ESPN or Martha Stewart — and as profitable.

To achieve that, he has launched a website, a twice-yearly newsletter that he says reaches 2.5 million households, radio spots and the company's signature production, dLifeTV, which airs nationally on CNBC.

The weekly half-hour program is co-hosted by Miss America 1999, Nicole Johnson Baker, who was diagnosed with Type I diabetes in 1993. Discussion topics range from erectile dysfunction to drinking and diabetes to cooking.

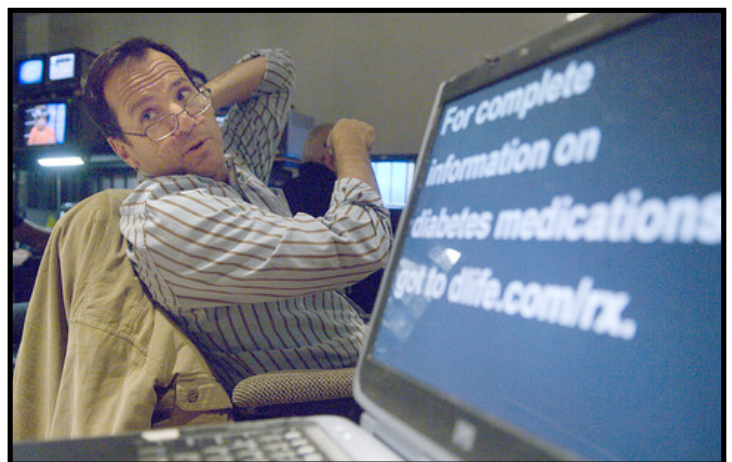
Although there are several magazines and websites devoted to the disease, dLifeTV is the first weekly TV show to spotlight it. Its advisory board includes diabetes specialists, endocrinologists, exercise specialists and psychiatrists.

Its talk show format, a mix of expert medical advice and personal stories, has found favor with viewers such as Elliot Cohen, 73, of the Kensington section of Berlin.

Diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes eight years ago, he shed 45 pounds and controls his disease through diet and exercise. But sticking to a prescribed regimen can be a difficult, isolating experience.

Cohen, a retired pharmacist, does not watch dLife for its medical content — that aspect he knows. He tunes in because it provides a weekly feel-good fix and a reminder that he isn't alone.

“There's a whole big world of diabetics out there,” he said.



Howard Steinberg, the founder of Westport-based dLife, works in the production booth during taping of the privately owned multimedia company's TV program, which is shown nationally on Sunday nights on CNBC. Steinberg started the company in 2004 to reach out to those who live with diabetes, as he has since he was 10.

Like a gentle drill sergeant, dLifeTV offers regular reinforcement.

"Even though I was taught about diet by people at the Joslin [Diabetes Center in New London], seeing dLife week in and week out over a period of time, it becomes more and more ingrained," Cohen said. "With dLife, it's a constant thing."

Watching a half-hour program doesn't mean you can skip visits to the doctor or dietitian, said Jean Kaostak, manager of education and research at the Joslin Center. "I think dLife is legitimate. I think they've got a good thing going, but it's not a substitute for medical education."

Today, Steinberg says dLifeTV, which airs Sundays at



Steinberg poses for a photo with Mother Love, a regular contributor, during a taping of the dLife television show. The photo was taken for the woman's husband, Kennedy Rogers.

7 p.m., has almost a half-million viewers.

Naysayers had a field day when Steinberg announced that he was going to produce a TV show about diabetes:

Who's going to watch it? Hypochondriacs, disease-of-the-week

enthusiasts? And the what-next contingent wondered whether his follow-up project would be the Heart Disease Channel or This Week With Irritable Bowel Syndrome. But Steinberg's intent was to make information accessible, and TV was the natural medium.

"Watching it on TV is a lot easier than taking a subscription and having to sit and read," Cohen said.

That accessibility has attracted a growing list of sponsors, including Glucerna, Smuckers Sugar-Free, Novo Nordisk, Pfizer, Abbott, Bayer and Colgate. Although the pharmaceutical and medical product companies are an obvious fit, other sponsors' links to diabetes are less so.

For example, unless you know that people with diabetes have a high incidence of gum disease, it might be unclear why Colgate toothpaste is an advertiser. Crestor, a drug that lowers cholesterol, also advertises because people with diabetes are more prone to heart disease, obesity, kidney disease, retinal problems and a long list of other ailments.

Steinberg isn't shy about disclosing his marketing concept. "I got this idea — disease states like diabetes are a lifestyle," he said. "What do you do to target a lifestyle? You create media that attracts them."

But although fashionistas who insist on wearing last year's shoes may only risk inclusion on a "fashion don't" list, diabetics who stray from a prescribed regimen risk their health — even death, Steinberg said.

"You live it or you perish. 200,000 people die every year from diabetes-related disorders," he said. "Some lifestyles pick you — that's the case with diabetes."

Steinberg said his parents were Holocaust survivors who couldn't bring themselves to tell their son he had diabetes. A nurse advised him, quite by accident.

She handed Steinberg a syringe and an orange, and instructed him to practice injecting it so he could eventually use the needle on himself.

Feeling awkward and stigmatized, he tried to keep his disease a secret. When he was 15, his strategy backfired. Working at a summer camp, a foot locker containing his syringes and insulin didn't arrive as expected.

For two days, he managed to function without his medication. On the third day, he became sick and had to be rushed to the hospital.

"Instead of being anonymous, I was now the kid who almost died," Steinberg said. "I was out of the closet."

As a teenager, he rebelled against doctor's orders. "I ate wrong, drank, smoked pot," he said. But after college, he realized the gravity of his behavior. "I had to get this diabetes monster under control," he said.

To this day, Steinberg reserves his deepest compassion for children and teenagers with diabetes.

"Too many kids feel crappy and alone. You're robbed of a lot of your childhood by having diabetes," he said.

Aware of that isolation, Steinberg has invited several children and teenagers living with diabetes to share their experiences on dLifeTV.

Steinberg recently moved the program's filming from New York City to Westport, dLife's corporate headquarters, taking advantage of Connecticut's generous movie and film tax incentives.

Tucked into a two-story building across the street from the Westport train station, dLife's second-floor suite, with its exposed brick walls, is more like an artist's studio than a corporate headquarters, and its 27 full-time staff members are more like disciples than employees — perhaps because so many have been touched by diabetes, said Tom Karlya, vice president of development — including himself. Tears form in Karlya's eyes when he describes his daughter Kaitlin's struggles — she was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes at age 2.

"I have been living with diabetes since September 26, 1992, the day she was diagnosed," Karlya said. "She's 15 now. She's a very strong girl; she wants to be a doctor. This disease isn't going to beat her."

On a recent morning, Steinberg, recovering from knee surgery, was speed-limping through the hall, a man on a mission, not to be stopped or slowed. That unrelenting drive does not go unnoticed by the people who work there.

That's what you get when you have that kind of passion leading the ship, Karlya said. "We feed off that energy."