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Diabetics: one sweet market

Patients are finding business opportunities in the disease -- with product endorsements, a TV show and more.

By Daniel Yi, Times Staff Writer

Howard Steinberg produces a television program that has all the elements of a typical variety show. There are profiles of famous people, reports on current issues and an attractive host, a former Miss America.

But the independently produced show, which airs weekly as paid programming on CNBC, stands on a single theme. It is all about, and for, diabetics — and believed to be the only television show built around a specific disease. All of the ads are for diabetes-related products, such as specially formulated food supplements and insulin testing strips.

"Diabetics are not just patients, they are consumers," Steinberg said of the appeal of his show, "dLife — For Your Diabetes Life," which claims nearly half a million viewers.

Steinberg is among a growing number of diabetics — including celebrity endorsers, magazine publishers and an investment advisor — who are finding business opportunities in marketing to others with the chronic disease.

"From a business perspective, diabetes is the perfect disease," said David Kliff, a diabetic and investment analyst who specializes in diabetes-related ventures. Diabetics "consume tons of disposable products, and there is no cure. It is a license to print money."

Actor Wilford Brimley of the 1980s TV show "Our House" has pitched for diabetic products supplier Liberty Medical for so long that he has become a subject of parody by comedians. Blues music icon B.B. King and soul diva Patti LaBelle endorse products for

a division of Johnson & Johnson. And pro basketball player Adam Morrison, known for testing his blood sugar on the sidelines, also signed a deal with Johnson & Johnson — along with the traditional sneaker contract — after being drafted this year by the NBA's Charlotte Bobcats.

Entertainer Mother Love has revived her career by promoting herself as a diabetic, and former Miss America Nicole Johnson Baker, the main host of "dLife," has built a marketing machine around her disease.

Healthcare advocates see in the trend a glaring sign that the country is losing its battle against the epidemic, with the most common form, Type 2, closely linked to unhealthful diets and lifestyles.

"Our society and our medical community has basically thrown up their hands and decided it is too hard to get people to lead healthier lives, and it is easier to push drugs," said Michael Jacobsen, executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

Sales of diabetes-treatment products total about \$8 billion a year in the U.S., according to pharmaceutical research firm IMS Health Inc., and drug makers spend close to \$1 billion promoting their goods to doctors and patients.



SHOW BIZ: Howard Steinberg, center, creator of "dLife—For Your Diabetes Life," helps prepare a food segment for the paid programming, which claims half a million viewers. It is believed to be the only television show built around a specific disease.

"There is no money in prevention," said John Abramson, a clinical instructor at Harvard Medical School and author of "Overdosed America." "Our healthcare system is more driven by entrepreneurial opportunities than by reasoned analysis of effective approaches," he said.

The American Diabetes Assn., the nation's largest advocacy group for diabetics, declined to comment for this article, saying the group's focus is on research and support for those suffering from the disease. Much of the group's research is widely cited by diabetic marketers.

Steinberg, Kliff and others like them say they are simply capitalizing on their positions as insiders to help other diabetics, either by increasing awareness about the disease or, in Kliff's case, helping them make profitable investments.

"There are people who are offended by what I do," said Kliff, 45, who lives in the Chicago area and founded www.diabeticinvestor.com after fellow diabetics sought his financial opinion on companies making many of the medical products they used.

Profit fuels innovation, he said. "I am all for prevention, but if you take the profit motive away, you will not get what you need" to treat diabetes.

What makes diabetes suited for this unusual brand of commercialization is a combination of overwhelming numbers and a culture that values indulgence and success, observers say.

The number of diabetics in the U.S., believed to be about 21 million, exceeds the population of most states. The number is expected to rise to 48.3 million by 2050, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The disease — which affects the body's ability to convert blood glucose, or sugar, into energy — is so common that any stigma once associated with it is virtually gone. And because obesity, one of its leading causes, often is viewed as a societal problem, diabetics may elicit a good amount of empathy.

Diabetes is a marketing gold mine in another way. Although diabetes-related complications such as kidney and heart problems kill an estimated 200,000 people in the U.S. each year, the disease can be managed in large part with drugs and healthful lifestyles. The possibility of triumph through personal change, as opposed to other serious diseases whose outcomes are largely in the hands of medical science, is a compelling angle.

"Americans love success stories. They like stories about struggling and overcoming," said Arthur L. Caplan, director of the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Bioethics. "Nobody overcomes Parkinson's. Nobody overcomes Alzheimer's. We know how those stories end. But with diabetes, people like Adam Morrison or B.B. King are telling people what they want to hear: You can overcome. You can win."

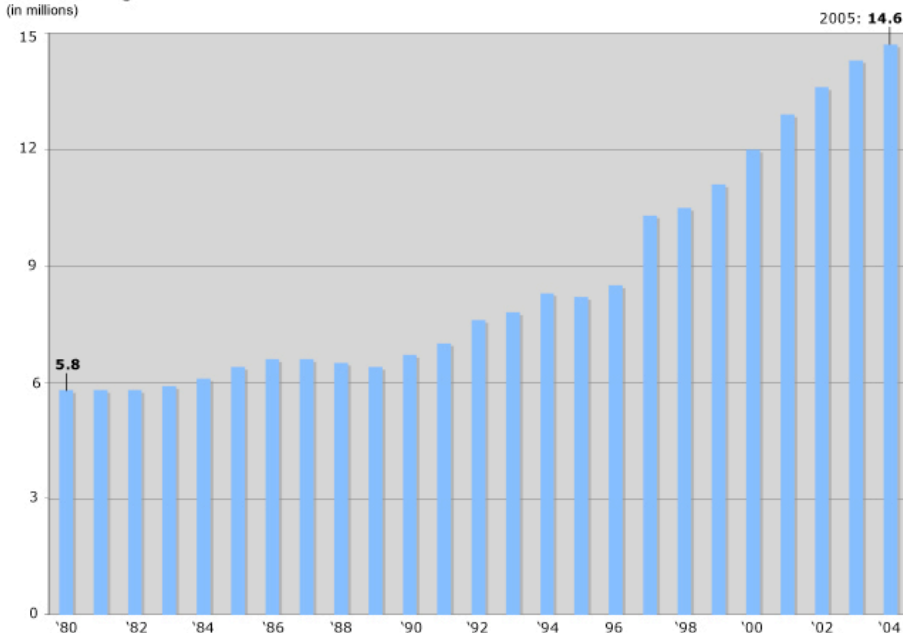
It is a common refrain among those marketing their diabetic experience.

"I have diabetes, but diabetes doesn't have me," said Mother Love, a stand-up comedian and radio personality who writes a column for "dLife's" website and sometimes co-hosts the show.

Love, 52, developed Type 2 diabetes in her mid-30s after years of overeating. Type 2 is closely linked to obesity and lack of exercise and accounts for 90% to 95% of cases. Type 1, also known as juvenile diabetes, is more common in children and is often linked to genetic factors. Although many who promote the fact that they are diabetic are Type 1, such as Morrison, their intended audience is mostly Type 2 sufferers.

Growing Epidemic

Number of diagnosed diabetics in the U.S.
(in millions)



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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"I was so large I couldn't breathe," Love said recently in a telephone interview from her San Gabriel Valley home.

"We have a saying in the African American community about diabetes: 'It's just a little sugar,' " the Cleveland native said. "But it is not just a little sugar.... This disease killed half of my family."

Love has lost more than 100 pounds and is keeping the disease in check.

"I wasn't trying to be a poster child for diabetes," she said. But the disease gave a boost to her career, landing her the job at "dLife."

If Love's career was remade by diabetes, Johnson Baker's has been defined by it.

She was crowned Miss America in 1999, seven years after being diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes. Since then, she has marketed herself as a voice for diabetics. The "dLife" host consults for pharmaceutical companies, lobbies and raises funds for diabetes research, and has a line of medical bracelets.

"Diabetes is the very reason why I became Miss America" — to promote awareness about the disease, Johnson Baker, 32, said. "In this horrible event of being diagnosed with diabetes came the greatest blessing."

Like others, Johnson Baker and Love see in their business endeavors an opportunity to help others. So does Steinberg, 47, creator of "dLife."

"Diabetes is a lifestyle," the marketing veteran said. "Some lifestyles you choose, some choose you."

The 30-minute program reflects that lifestyle. "dLife," a division of Steinberg's LifeMed Media



OPPORTUNITY: Steinberg says he's using his insider position to help others.

Inc., pays CNBC for the time slot on Sundays at 4 p.m. Pacific time. It is listed on CNBC's programming schedule and not categorized as an infomercial

because it is not aimed at selling any specific product. The editorial content is distinct from the advertising. Such independently produced programming is common on many cable channels, which often use them to fill gaps between their shows.

Much of "dLife" is about living with the disease, and the show has included cooking tips, a diabetic man talking about coping with erectile dysfunction, and a teenage girl discussing "diabulimia," in which people manipulate their insulin take to lose weight.

It has an upbeat and breezy side as well. A recent episode opened with a group of diabetic women talking about the challenges of dating.

One woman said she hesitated to tell her date that she had the disease. Everything was going well until he decided to play a prank on her by grabbing and tossing her pager. Except it wasn't her pager; it was her insulin pump.

"There is nothing like it out there," said viewer Lauren Lanning, 43, of Highlands Ranch, Colo., whose daughter Monica, 12, was diagnosed when she was 2.

"When I am on the Internet [researching diabetes], it is just me, by myself," Lanning said. "When we have 'dLife,' everyone in the family can watch."

Steinberg's Westport, Conn.-based company is expected to turn a profit by next year.