

Online coaching gives employees instant access

Hummingbird provides health, parenting help

BY JAMES RITCHIE
jritchie@bizjournals.com

Good intentions are a good start, but they're not enough to get healthy. Sean Slovenski's company tries to give people a boost, whether it's on the phone, by e-mail or through an instant message.

"By and large, people know what they need to do if they're overweight, if their cholesterol is a little high," said Slovenski, CEO of Hummingbird Coaching, based downtown. "But they really aren't good at setting the actions and sticking to them."

Companies contract to provide Hummingbird's coaching to their employees as a benefit.

Slovenski, who has a background in health and wellness at TriHealth and Mercy Health Partners, says his approach provides unlimited access to a coach, affordably. The coaching is worked into a routine through whatever medium is best for the users. They can get advice on exercise, nutrition, weight management, stress management and smoking cessation.

WEB SITES

www.hummingbirdcoaching.com
www.myhealthcoach.com
www.aboutmykids.com

"Two minutes of support at the right time is better than an hour at the wrong time," he said. "Sometimes you just need someone to ask, 'How did you do at the potluck lunch today?'"

The 10-year-old Hummingbird, which also has a parent-coaching component, is owned by Slovenski and Neal and Donna Mayerson. The Mayersons joined in 2003, bringing intellectual property - the parenting skills product Slovenski's company had developed for the Mayerson Foundation - and an influx of capital.

The company has doubled its business in each of the last two years, a trend Slovenski expects to continue for the next three years. (He would not provide revenue figures, saying only that



MARK BOWEN | COURIER

Sean Slovenski is CEO of Hummingbird Coaching, which coaches clients through phone, e-mail or instant messages to give them the support they need to get healthier.

Hummingbird is a multimillion-dollar firm.)

The growth has come as corporations warm to wellness programs as a way to save on health care costs. Mercer Health & Benefits found that 22 percent of employers and 53 percent of large employers (in a national survey of 3,000) offered health risk assessments in 2006.

"Three years ago we were seeing about one RFP (request for proposals) a year for health coaching," Slovenski said. "This year it's 10 a week on average."

Hummingbird's clients have included Motorola, UnitedHealthcare and TriHealth Inc.

The company has about 30 employees and works with several hundred coaches. It contracts with large insurers to use staff who can be readily trained as health coaches - nurses, counselors and nutrition experts, for example, who staff employee-assistance programs and nurse lines.

Health coaching can be effective, though "we need to have more studies done so we can determine the effectiveness of the different coaching methods and styles with different populations," said Bonnie Brehm, a nutritionist and registered

dietitian at the University of Cincinnati.

The real value of coaching is that it provides motivation and accountability for people in their efforts to get fit, she said.

Coaching should be complemented, said Brehm, an associate professor, by a work environment conducive to good health - one that provides, for example, enough time to get up and move around and healthy cafeteria and vending choices.

Hummingbird can offer unlimited access to coaches because usage follows a bell curve, with some people needing lots of contact and others needing only an occasional pick-me-up, such as an e-mail once a month. The average is four contacts a month.

But if employees need an hour-long phone call, they get it.

"Most who join are not traditional participants in fitness and wellness programs at work," Slovenski said. "They're moderate- to high-risk people who are trying to do things at home. They're more the wallflowers, and they find the anonymity of the Internet to be liberating."