

YOUR MONEY OR YOUR LIFESTYLE

How do you get 21st-century dieters to meet their weight-loss goals? You pay them, of course



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Every January, we make New Year's resolutions strikingly similar to those we made the year before: quit smoking, perhaps run a marathon. A big one is losing weight. But as millions of people resolve to fit into their skinny jeans this year, North Americans continue to grow heavier: According to the Canadian Health Measures Survey, almost a quarter of the Canadian population is considered obese.

In the United States, where the diet industry is big business, the increasingly overweight population spends more than \$50 billion annually on pills and potions, but it may be a simple \$100 bill that does the trick: One of the latest trends in weight loss is getting paid to drop the pounds.

A U.S. website, HealthyWage.com, motivates dieters with the promise of at least \$100 if they lower their body mass index from at least 30 (considered obese) to below 25 (considered normal). Those who are willing to pay \$300 of their own into the program can gain \$1,000 if they reach their goal. "For better or worse, we're a rewards-based culture," says co-founder David Roddenberry, who has registered more than 75,000

participants since launching two years ago and plans to expand into Canada this year.

As Roddenberry sees it, the incentive system applied by HealthyWage.com to losing weight could also be applied to other health-care goals, including smoking cessation, proper drug-use compliance, even basic hygiene. "If you can make things that seem like a chore, like taking your medication or even brushing your teeth, a little more fun with a small reward, I think you'll increase compliance," he says.

Research by Leslie John, a doctoral candidate in behavioural research at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, bears this theory out. To date, she has published two studies showing the effectiveness of using cash incentives to motivate weight loss. "It's not just the money per se," John says. "It's the specific structure of incentive schemes: They're designed to leverage a variety of psychological biases that people tend to have." In other words, paying people pound for pound can counteract the immediate gratification of, say, pound cake.

And as Roddenberry suggests, health-care outfits unrelated to weight have been also trying incentives. In Canada, the Canadian Cancer Society uses a lottery called Driven to Quit to entice Ontarians to give up smoking. The grand prize? A Honda or Toyota hybrid car. The initiative, now in its sixth year, requires participants to register online and pledge to go smoke-free during all of March. The winner,

who is picked through a random draw at the end of the month, is required to provide a urine sample to prove that he or she hasn't smoked.

"Anecdotally, we hear that it keeps people motivated," Krista Bennett of the Cancer Society says. "When they're having a craving, they [remember] that they've pledged to quit in this challenge and their name could be drawn as a winner."

Forget diets, nicotine patches or going cold turkey: In a world filled with ways to stray from good health, dangling the carrot of a material reward just may be the ticket to finally seeing a few of those perennial New Year's resolutions through.

