

THE DIET BATTLE—WEIGHT WATCHERS, JENNY CRAIG, AND SLIM-FAST⁶⁶

Want to lose weight? For about 71 million Americans and approximately 73 percent of all U.S. women, the answer is yes,⁶⁷ and for weight-loss companies, that's the right answer. The weight-loss industry, worth over \$60 billion,⁶⁸ is growing steadily because lifestyles and food choices keep working against people's desire to lose weight. Many Americans spend their days sitting in front of a computer and their evenings sitting in front of a television. Restaurant meals, prepared foods, and high-fat, high-sugar snacks have replaced home-cooked meals, whole grains, and fresh produce. Exercise is limited to clicking a mouse or turning an ignition key. These habits are fattening (both literally and figuratively) the profits for the weight-loss industry, as well as expanding belt sizes. By the time we factor in diet pills, specially packaged weight-loss meals and snacks, diet programs, and the whole range of products and services promising bathing-suit bodies, we've got a highly lucrative market.

Three recognized diet aid behemoths, Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, and Slim-Fast, share a substantial piece of the pie. These companies stress their flexibility and ability to accommodate a wide range of lifestyles. They also showcase success stories.⁶⁹ But they approach dieting differently in their quest for new members.

The Big Three

Founded in 1963, Weight Watchers International now boasts groups in more than 30 countries worldwide. The program teaches portion control and the basics of good nutrition, allowing members to select their own foods. A point system, based on nutritional value, encourages members to select healthy foods, exercise appropriately, and control portions.⁷⁰ Dieters record meals and snacks in a paper or electronic journal. Although members can follow the Weight Watchers regimen without support, the company notes that the most successful members are those who weigh in at weekly group sessions and attend meetings. Weight Watchers members can prepare their own food, dine out, or purchase Weight Watchers-prepared or -endorsed dinners, snacks, and desserts at most grocery stores. To further support dieters in making healthy food choices, Weight Watchers increased the number of points for fat content and reduced them for fiber.

Rated the top weight-loss program by Consumer Reports Health in 2011, Jenny Craig promises a unique and comprehensive plan for food, body, and mind.⁷¹ Members eat meals and snacks prepared and packaged by Jenny Craig, supplemented by fresh fruits and vegetables. Jenny Craig's offerings provide portion control and accommodate busy schedules by reducing meal prep time. Members meet weekly on a one-on-one basis with a personal counselor and are encouraged to develop an exercise program. Like Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig offers customized programs for men and teenagers and for those who prefer to lose weight on their own rather than travel to a center. Jenny Craig lapped Weight Watchers and other diet programs in the Consumer Reports Health ranking because of members' success in weight loss, the duration of time they remained committed to the program, and the nutritional value of the foods.⁷²

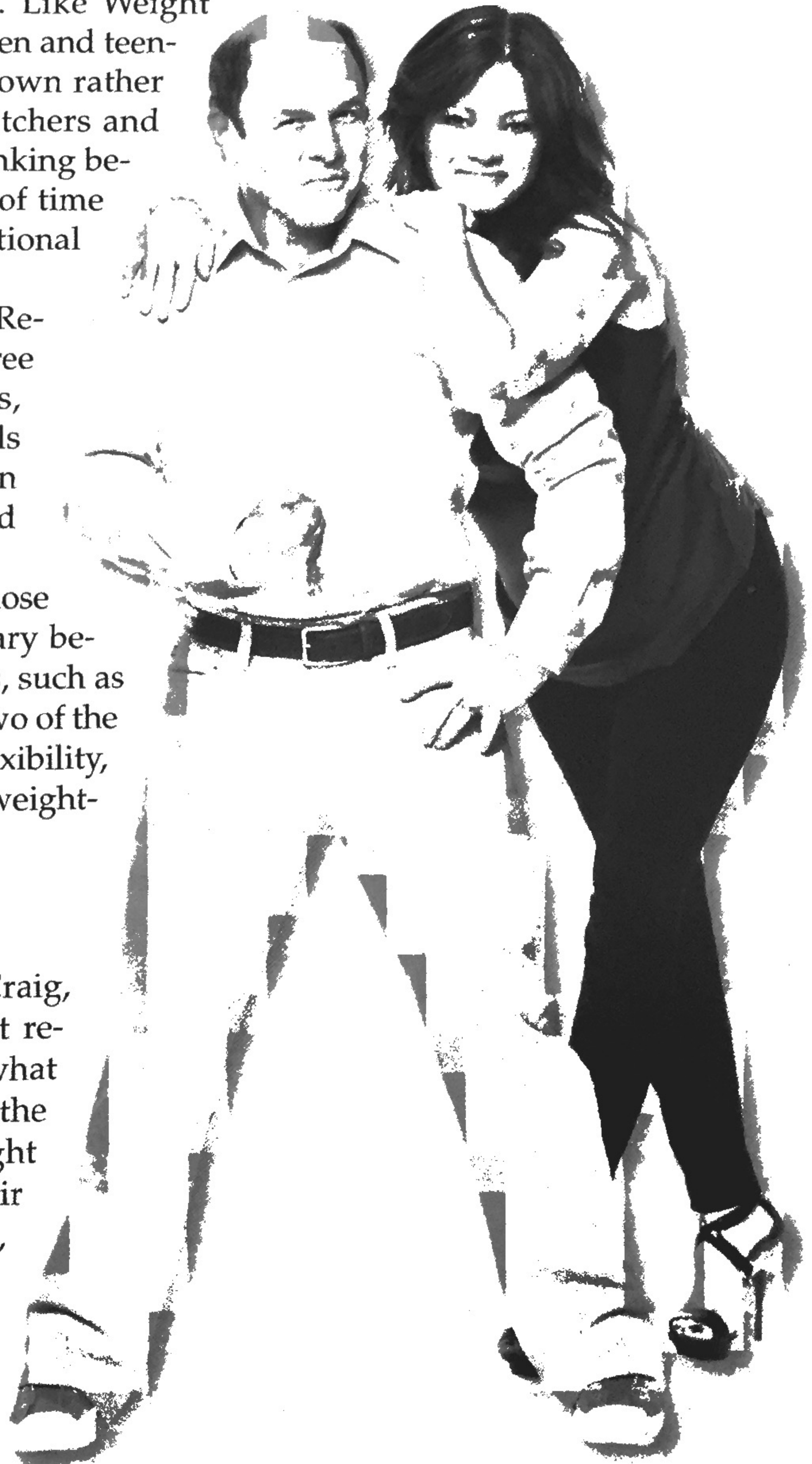
Slim-Fast, which ranked second in the Consumer Reports Health ratings, offers dieters a combination of three small and healthy snacks, two meal-replacement shakes, and one 500-calorie meal daily.⁷³ By eating six small meals daily, dieters maintain steady glucose levels, and the plan ensures adequate intakes of carbohydrates, protein, and fiber.⁷⁴

Other diet programs abound, but even when people lose weight on these regimens, the losses tend to be temporary because the diets are based on unsustainable eating patterns, such as eliminating major food groups (e.g., no carbohydrates). Two of the big diet companies also offer social reinforcement and flexibility, which appears to help people remain committed to their weight-loss programs.

Defining the Difference

Perhaps the most significant difference among Jenny Craig, Slim-Fast, and Weight Watchers is the amount of effort required. Jenny Craig dieters don't have to think about what they eat; everything is prepared for them. Dieters on the Weight Watchers plan must learn how to make the right choices from among the foods that surround them in their daily lives. Slim-Fast combines both ease and education, but it provides fewer choices for controlled meals than Jenny Craig does. Each program competes heavily for members, particularly in the early months of the year, when Americans return to the scales after indulging for the holidays.

To entice men into its program, Jenny Craig uses Jason Alexander, the actor who played George Costanza on the TV series Seinfeld, as a spokesperson, pictured here with another Jenny Craig spokesperson, Valerie Bertanelli, teenage TV star from the late 70s of One Day at a Time and Touched by an Angel.



The diet giants are locked in another battle as well, this one targeted at men.⁷⁵ Although a completely different program isn't necessary—both genders need to cut calories and increase exercise to lose weight—marketing specifically to men has the power to bring in new members.

While the Weight Watchers programs are identical for men and women, the men's website is tailored to their interests and concerns, focusing more on working out and less on the eating plan. The men's site also mentions the link between obesity and erectile dysfunction, implying that a man's sex life might improve if he loses weight.

Jenny Craig's men's program also is very similar to its women's program, but tweaked to accommodate differences in food cravings and issues with portion control. Men on this program, Jenny Craig promises, can still have a beer and fries once in a while. To further entice men to its program, Jenny Craig uses Jason Alexander, the actor who played George Costanza on the television series *Seinfeld*, as a spokesperson.

The Slim-Fast program tends to appeal to men because they like to lose weight on their own rather than participating in group meetings.⁷⁶ The company has used male celebrities, including a former New York mayor, to sell its products.

Technology Support for Dieters

Dieters have a variety of electronic devices to help track food consumption and exercise. Using any Internet-ready device, Weight Watchers members can check points values for foods, including meals at popular restaurants, and add snacks or meals to their daily journal. Similar services and applications for fitness training are available via cell phone applications. Using a camera-equipped cell phone, for example, dieters can photograph a meal and send the picture to a registered dietitian, who replies with recommendations for modifying portions or food choices. Theoretically this approach is more honest than keeping a food diary, because dieters may be tempted not to record full amounts. These services require additional fees though.

Questions

1. Trace how you might go through the steps in the consumer decision process if you were thinking of going on a diet and using any of these diet programs.
2. How have Weight Watchers, Slim-Fast, and Jenny Craig created value?
3. Identify the determinant attributes that set the Weight Watchers, Slim-Fast, and Jenny Craig programs apart. Use those attributes to develop a compensatory purchasing model similar to the one in Exhibit 6.2.
4. How can Weight Watchers, Slim-Fast, and Jenny Craig increase the probability of customer satisfaction?
5. Which factors examined in this chapter might have the most impact on consumers' propensity to go on a diet and choose one of these diet programs?