



iChange appoints a new CEO, raises funding

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iChange Networks Inc., a startup online community to help people make major life changes, announced the appointment of a new chief executive officer.

Stuart MacFarlane will lead iChange, and joins the company on the heels of a funding round from Momentum Venture Management. Most recently, MacFarlane served as a principal at MVM.

The amount of funding was undisclosed, but iChange Networks is using the backing to increase its stake in the growing health and wellness market sector.

"iChange is at the forefront of a new approach to weight loss and personal betterment, and we see this as an excellent investment in an innovative company in a growth industry," Andy Wilson, managing director at MVM, said in a company release.

Headquartered in Fullerton, Calif., iChange was founded in 2008 and provides an accountability-based approach to weight loss. The company's system to help people better their lives was designed by psychologists, registered dieticians and weight certified nutritionists.

In an interview with MacFarlane, DailyVista learned more on [iChange's](#) growth plans and current development under his leadership.

iChange's top priority is to continue developing the site so that it can deliver the best experience possible for users, MacFarlane said.

"We don't just want to help them lose weight, but we want them to feel like they are making sustainable changes that will lead to a lifetime of better health," he said. "We also want to help members connect into a support system of nutrition professionals and other individuals that are making similar life changes."

He said that the company's goal is to have users that are "so thrilled with the site that they each tell five of their friends."

According to MacFarlane, with the accountability-based model, iChange users are much more likely to succeed, knowing that others are watching, participating and supporting in their progress.

"To that end, we let people create or join support groups, and work with qualified nutrition professionals to get personalized service," he said. "The built-in support group structure on the site seems to be contributing to some of the early viral marketing success we have seen."

In the future, MacFarlane said that iChange will be open to other nutrition and fitness professionals who are looking to offer a variety of weight management programs. He said people will be able to come to the site and find specialized experts and groups that closely match their individual needs.

"Programs will range from those targeting specific weight-related health conditions, such as

diabetes, to fitness-centric weight groups, to programs targeted at different ages and life stages," he said.

While iChange began as a weight loss program, MacFarlane said that the company is expanding into other areas like disease management, specifically diabetes.

"By itself, diet and weight loss is a \$58 billion per year industry in the U.S., so we think we have plenty to work with initially without spreading ourselves too thin," he said. "Later in the year, we anticipate opening the site to other categories like addiction recovery, counseling and disease management for a range of conditions."

Right now, iChange does very little advertising, MacFarlane said. He said that the company has done some testing within the social media realm, and those campaigns tested well, but the company's larger focus is word-of-mouth, having its user base do the marketing and advertising for the company.

"In terms of leveraging partnerships as a growth strategy, we have been approached by several potential partners that are looking to provide a high-quality diet and nutrition service to their members," he said. "We are testing a couple of these partnerships now, and based on the early results, I expect that it will be a strong acquisition channel."

MacFarlane said that iChange's primary demographic consists of women aged 20 to 50, and that most of the site's members realize that they need to find other people with similar goals to help them reach their own.

"Within our member population, we see people with a variety of health and nutrition needs," he said. "One consistent theme across our members has been a history of dieting failures and an awareness that making a major life change like losing weight, is often too difficult to do on your own."

MacFarlane said that part of the reason iChange raised external funding was to invest in targeted marketing campaigns. He said the company has begun experimenting with keyword buys, affiliate programs and working with communities that value the service.

"We try to measure every marketing and ad dollar we spend to make sure it is delivering a return that fits with our growth strategy," he said.

Because the weight loss industry is fraught with companies that are less-than-credible, MacFarlane said that a big challenge for iChange is cutting through the clutter in the market.

"One challenge for us, and any credible business within the weight loss category, is to rise above the noise and marketing dollars being spent to acquire consumers..." MacFarlane said. "Many people are suspicious of us when they first come to the site. A frequent comment is 'You seem too good to be true.' While we would like to think that this comment is a direct reflection on what we've built so far, it really highlights the low customer expectations for an online weight loss site."