

Kirstie Alley splits with Jenny Craig to start her own business

by Keith Darce

SAN DIEGO - After splitting with Carlsbad, Calif., weight-loss company Jenny Craig, actress and celebrity spokeswoman Kirstie Alley has plans to launch her own weight-loss business in 2009.

The venture could put Alley, 57, in direct competition with her former employer.

"The weight-loss field is wide open and not immune to new ideas and improved solutions for the fat problems that plague many of us Americans every day," Alley said in a statement posted on People magazine's Web site. "I want to create something new that will help millions of people end the seemingly never ending fatty-roller coaster ride."

Jenny Craig officials didn't learn about Alley's new plans until they were posted on the Web site Tuesday, said Scott Parker, vice president of marketing and new business development.

Executives with the Carlsbad company aren't worried about Alley stealing clients, Parker said Wednesday.

"Fortunately, there's a lot of room in the weight-loss category," he said. "There are many different ways for people to be successful at losing weight. We wish her success."

Jenny Craig hired Alley as a spokeswoman and celebrity client in 2005. The television and film star went on to lose 75 pounds in a process that was documented in popular commercials that helped pull the company out of a slump.

Jenny Craig offers clients personal weight-loss plans through more than 600 centers mostly in the United States, Australia and New Zealand. Clients pay a membership fee and purchase prepared meals from the company.

More than 150,000 people follow a Jenny Craig program in an average week, according to the company's Web site.

Alley and Jenny Craig parted ways at the end of 2007 when the spokeswoman's contract with the company expired after "extensive" negotiations to extend the deal, Parker said. "Our offer was ultimately rejected. We

had an amicable parting," he said.

Parker said the breakup wasn't related to the company's decision last spring to expand its spokeswoman stable by hiring actress Valerie Bertinelli. Bertinelli, 47, and Alley appeared in a series of Jenny Craig commercials that cast Alley as a weight-loss mentor.

In mid-January, just weeks after Alley's departure, the company hired actress and hip-hop singer Queen Latifa, 37, to front a new marketing campaign focused on weight loss as a way to improve health and lower the risk of diabetes and other diseases.

While Alley's statement didn't provide any details about her plan to create her own "weight-loss brand," it suggested the venture was inspired at least in part by the vast following she accrued over the past three years as the face of Jenny Craig.

"Somehow, I've also fallen into the position of 'accidental' role model for, apparently, millions of people out there losing weight by whatever means," her statement said. "This was something I did not bargain for, or foresee happening. Nevertheless, it is something I've grown to embrace and something I intend to continue to pursue."

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