

## Oprah brings her own history to Weight Watchers

Weight Watchers share prices more than doubled Monday with the news that Oprah Winfrey bought a 10 percent stake in the struggling diet company and joined its board.

Health and weight loss are a big topic for the Oprah media empire and Winfrey personally — the billionaire has publicly struggled with her weight, and she'll bring that history with her to the boardroom at Weight Watchers, which has been grappling with sinking sales as it tries to pivot into a lifestyle brand.

Weight Watchers said it contacted Winfrey initially, and her spokespeople said she's been enrolled in the program for a couple months. But marketing consultant [Jonathan Baskin](#) said this isn't a typical celebrity endorsement.

"She's effectively paid them \$43 million to go be a spokesperson. I find that absolutely refreshing, because let's face it, how many people actually think [Fred Thompson has a reverse home mortgage](#)?" Baskin said.

Indeed, in her TV show — now an entire channel — magazine and other properties Winfrey has talked a lot about her own weight loss, discussing lots of strategies and partnering with several experts. Branding consultant [Denise Lee Yohn](#) said those relationships have been mutually beneficial, more often than not.

"One of the reasons why she's an excellent spokesperson for Weight Watchers is because she's been so vocal and transparent about her weight struggles," Yohn said. "The fact that she has yo-yoed back and forth brings a realness and a humanity to their brand and therefore the effectiveness of their solution."

So Weight Watchers is more than one of Oprah's Favorite Things — a list that includes [plenty of sweets](#) — but over a long career, Oprah has hurt some weight-loss tactics by shining a light on them.

In a now-iconic 1998 episode of "Oprah," Winfrey brought out a wagon with 67 pounds of fat in it, to illustrate how much she'd lost with an all-liquid OptiFast diet.

The stunt gave Winfrey her largest audience yet, and prompted hundreds of thousands of calls to OptiFast manufacturers, but doctors cautioned that the diet is difficult to keep up, especially when one starts reintroducing solid food.

"What is interesting is not that Oprah lost the weight, but whether three years from now she will maintain the loss," a physician told the [New York Times](#) in the days after the broadcast. Sure enough, Winfrey ended up gaining much of the weight back, writing in her magazine that she gained 10 pounds two weeks after going back to food. The [Wall Street Journal](#) notes that Winfrey later denounced all-liquid diets, hurting sales, and later increased national interest in running in subsequent years.

Around this same time she began training with Bob Greene, a fitness expert whose diet brand Winfrey championed. Greene's brand enjoyed a huge bump from his celebrity client, to the point where he stopped charging her for his services, but the [Times](#) notes that the deal cut both ways: When Winfrey was back above 200 pounds in 2009, it didn't exactly reflect well on her trainer. Greene maintained that Winfrey's personal weight struggles weren't hurting his sales.

"It doesn't bother me in the least," he told the Times in 2009. "Everyone knows she follows my plan, but when she doesn't, she gains weight, and when she does, it's the only thing that works for her."

Another key player in Winfrey's orbit, Dr. Mehmet Oz, hasn't fared quite as well. Oz has come under fire — and government scrutiny — for the weight loss strategies and other "miracle drugs" discussed on his show, which is

produced by Winfrey's Harpo Studios.

It's not yet clear how much Winfrey will publicly endorse Weight Watchers — there are reportedly no immediate plans to feature the program on OWN or in O Magazine. But Monday's stock rally is proof that people are paying attention, and Winfrey's likely to be a spokesperson as long as she owns a stake.

"With normal spokespeople in this category, like a [Jessica Simpson](#), they can just move on to the next celebrity, whereas with an investor, and a very public [one], it's not a paid spokesperson relationship, it's more of a business endorsement," Yohn said. "She will be under a lot more scrutiny: Is she really keeping the weight off? Does this really work?"