



Coaching a win-win program

Jenny Dillon

DR MARGARITE Vale introduces herself with a card littered with letters — PhD, BScEd, MNutrDiet, DipEpidBiostat. Formidable qualifications indeed, leading one to imagine her office wall is lined with dark-framed university and college certificates boasting her expertise.

Now she can add a certificate as director of the 2009 Telstra Business of the Year, on top of the certificate for being the Businessowner Micro Business of the Year for companies that employ five or fewer people, sponsored by News Limited, publisher of *The Daily Telegraph*.

Not only is this a rare accolade for a scientist and medical researcher, but Dr Vale excelled in a competitive business by following unorthodox — for business, that is — marketing methods.

Dr Vale's business The Coach Program helps people with chronic illnesses such as heart disease and diabetes manage health and improve lifestyles.

The patients are contacted after leaving hospital, then regularly over six months until they hit targets for cholesterol, weight, smoking and other activities.

Her clients aren't the patients, but the health-care industry, from hospitals to health funds, which buy her programs as they are the ones who get the bills if

the patient is readmitted after failing to meet targets.

Her program, formalised into a licensing business only in 2005, was the most widely used in Australia and was now in the Netherlands.

"There is also huge potential in Europe and the US," Dr Vale said. "What we want is for it to be the most successful program in the world."

What put The Coach Program ahead of rivals is all in statistics.

"It is truly innovative in a number of ways. The model differs from other full-service deliveries because the patients are always contacted by the coach. We don't wait for the patient to contact the coach because if you [do, it] fails.

"We have an extremely high participation rate. It's about 99 per cent in the public health system and 65 to 80 per cent in the private sector. With other companies, I've heard it can get about as low as 3 per cent."

The program has no marketing budget, instead relying on its research and academic writing.

"Chronic disease management [is] really big business," Dr Vale said. "Many groups are putting together big programs and trying to market them but they haven't done the research and they're expensive."



New life: Dr Margarite Vale's business of the year

Picture: Jeff Herbert