

9 Tactics for Workplace Wellness Success

By Kathleen Koster
December 11, 2013

Technology has taken over the wellness space in recent years. Employers and consumers have purchased breaking-edge technology in health and mobile spaces to improve wellness through everything from biometric screenings to incentive design. Now, many employers are getting back to basics and focusing on improving the company's culture of health and workplace environment to change unhealthy behavior.

According to OptumHealth's latest workplace survey, 47% of large companies are interested in environmental strategies that can influence healthy behaviors at work. The top changes employers made to their environment related to their cafeterias and vending machines, as well as establishing smoke-free campuses. In all, one-in-three employers has made changes to their work environment.

While the majority of employers focus their time and energy into incentives for healthy behaviors, many thought leaders believe incentives don't drive change, they only drive compliance.

"We can use some external [motivators] but we eventually want people to be intrinsically accountable. We need to balance how we invest in resources," said Seth A. Serxner, chief health officer and senior vice president of population health at Optum.

Speaking at the Care Continuum Alliance forum this past fall, he — along with other employers and consultants in the audience — suggested the best way to encourage healthy decisions is to make cultural changes that affect the entire population, as well as the broad environment.

As one audience member put it: "Instead of having wellness be drudgery, you can create an education that can be fun." Here are some unique and innovative examples:

BIG steps

One employer revamped its stairwell next to an escalator. It made the stairs musical, based on the famous scene with Tom Hanks dancing on a floor piano in the movie *Big*. After the company made the steps light up and play musical notes, people ran up and down the stairs. And the escalators next to the stairs? Those were unused and empty.

"The point is they made it fun," said Serxner.

Cardboard cut-outs

One employer made cardboard cut-outs of its chief medical officer holding a dry-erase board and placed 50 of these cut-outs around high-traffic areas of the large campus, such as security guard desks or elevator banks. Wellness champions for each unit wrote different wellness messages on the boards for their colleagues. With the targeted and highly visible messaging, the employer increased participation at the local level and successfully got the word out about upcoming wellness initiatives.

It's about changing the environment. It's about increasing the visibility of senior management around the initiative," said Beena Thomas, vice president of health and wellness at Optum.

Elevator blackout

Another employer incentivized workers to take stairs and avoid the elevator. First, it shut off the elevator during the peak morning rush hour. If employees wanted to take the elevator they had to arrive before 7:30 a.m. or wait until

after 8:30 a.m. This initiative generated a great deal of buzz. The HR manager also posted a sign-in sheet on each floor in the stairwell, so employees could write their name when they reached their floor. The HR manager then would send an email each day that included people's stairs steps, which also generated friendly competition as well as to reward those employees who'd taken the most steps.

Labeling in vending machines

Even if your vending machine vendor doesn't allow its products to be substituted for healthy alternatives, managers can flip the bags of potato chips or candy bars so the consumer sees the nutrition label on the back before they buy the unhealthy snack.

Get marketing involved

One employer makes internal wellness outreach a core job responsibility for its marketing team. Part of the marketing department's performance review depends on how well it internally markets wellness programs to employees.

Elevator music tuned to wellness

Anyone who has joined a conference call before the host dials in has heard the soft elevator music as they wait on hold. "One employer replaced the 'on hold' elevator music with wellness messaging," said Thomas.

Instead of smooth jazz, employees heard messaging such as, 'Come get a biometric screening today in conference room B!' The employer could change out the message depending on its current campaign or initiative and, what's more, it knows it's delivering the message to a targeted audience who is stuck listening until the call starts.

Screen savers

Similarly, another Optum employer-client replaced the screen savers on company computers and laptops with wellness messages so that healthy initiatives would appear once the screen went idle. After six months of using this strategy, the company had a 30% increase in the use of preventive care benefits. When the employer asked where workers found out about the benefit, employees pointed to the screen savers. And the outreach only required a simple conversation with IT to set up.

Movie trailers

In 2013, Air Liquide set out to introduce consumer-driven health plans, as well as have an active enrollment for almost 5,000 employees for the first time in over 17 years.

In order to do this, the company ramped up its communication strategy to build buzz about what was coming next. The company launched three movie trailers (one sci-fi, another romantic comedy, and one action-themed) using Lego stop-motion animation. Additionally, it used movie posters, postcards, a glossy guide and movie tickets to a private viewing of the trailers and a new film for the kick-off.

Air Liquide got the word out and had 25% enrollment in their high-deductible health plan. What's more, over 96% of employees took action in during the active enrollment.

No flu for you

Banner Health launched the "No Flu for You" campaign at their workplace, which gave employees and medical staff a choice. Either they got a flu immunization or they had to wear a medical mask for the entire influenza season.