

WELCOA 

Special Report

Rewards For Healthy Lifestyles

Employers can reinforce good employee health by sponsoring healthy lifestyle contests and campaigns. These encourage such behavior as smoking cessation, healthy eating, and weight loss — with the support and discipline of an organized event. | **By Steven P. Noeldner, Ph.D.**

Lifestyle Choices Affect Health

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that at least 50% of individual health status and associated health care costs are directly related to lifestyle choices. The concept of individual choice provides the foundation for an effective health management program, and highlights the importance of building health improvement activities on a framework for behavior change.

Framework for Behavior Change

Mercer Health & Benefits developed a simple model to describe an effective behavior change framework, which includes three major phases: 1. Awareness-Commitment, 2. Skill Building, and 3. Maintenance. In the Awareness phase, individuals recognize that behavior changes would provide benefits, or help them avoid unpleasant consequences. Once an individual is Aware of the need to make a change, the

individual needs to make a Commitment to change a behavior — turning “should do’s” into “must do’s”. Once a Commitment is made, Skill Building is necessary to develop and sustain the new behavior. During skill-building, individuals gain the knowledge, and hence, skills and self-efficacy needed to act on and meet their Commitment. During the Maintenance phase, individuals learn to face and deal with obstacles they may encounter, and to manage lapses in their Commitment. It should be noted, that research has shown most individuals go through the behavior change cycle — start, lapse, restart — six to seven times before they make a lasting change. Thus, it is unrealistic to expect everyone who starts to make a behavior change to sustain that behavior permanently after the first attempt.

Campaigns and Contests

Healthy lifestyle (behavior) contests or campaigns provide people with the opportunity to try out new behaviors (Skill Building) within the structure

and with the support of an organized event. These campaigns are most effective when they are designed to appeal to a broad range of people in the population (employees), from those who may already be practicing the behavior, to those who are not. They will also focus on an incremental change in individual behavior that is an improvement over the current state, rather than meeting what may be a lofty, hard to attain goal set against a national norm. As well, effective campaigns and contests focus on the bigger picture of individual health status and a variety of lifestyle choices that relate to optimal health, such as, increases in physical activity, making healthier food choices, and improved self-esteem. Some examples of popular health improvement contests or campaigns are smoking cessation programs, exercise campaigns, healthy eating campaigns, health improvement seminars, community wellness events, and weight loss contests. The ideal campaign combines several of these elements, and also provides obvious

connections (references) to other programs and resources that exist in the overall health management program. An example would be a nutrition and activity campaign with a stress management component that encourages people to use the support of their health coach, participate in a 10,000 Steps a Day® activity, and use printed and on-line resources that are available to them. In addition to their use as skill builders, campaigns are also opportunities to show peer and organizational commitment, a vital social component to achieving sustained changes.

Rewards and Incentives

Rewards or incentives are often used to encourage employees to participate in contests or campaigns, and have been demonstrated to be very effective in driving enrollment. While the goal is ultimately to help individuals develop internal (intrinsic) motivation to practice healthy behaviors for the benefits they provide, external motivators (rewards or incentives) can provide the initial “push” to get people started. External rewards can also keep people motivated in the early stages of practicing a new behavior before the benefits of the new behavior are fully realized and internal motivation is developed.

Results or Participation

Referring to the previously described concept that lasting behavior change results from multiple start-lapse-restart cycles; most people who join a campaign or contest as a novice (e.g., a sedentary person who joins a 10,000 Steps campaign) are not likely to continue practicing that behavior permanently after the contest ends. If the ultimate goal is to help people make healthy lifestyle choices



consistently, then the result of completing one campaign (e.g., 10,000 steps a day for 8 weeks, eating five portions of fruits and vegetables each day, losing 10 pounds in 12 weeks, etc.) may not be as important as learning and practicing skills that can be used for a lifetime of healthy living. In addition to learning skills, participation leads to increased self-confidence, which improves the likelihood that new behaviors will become permanent at some point in the future.

Rewarding participation (meaning completion, not just enrollment), rather than the result or outcome of a contest or campaign, is more beneficial and supportive for individuals who want to improve their health for the long term. If the contest “winners” are only those who achieve the best result, then those who “lose” will receive negative reinforcement. In other words, their belief that they can’t succeed at practicing the behavior will be reinforced. As well, those who think they will have no chance of “winning” will be deterred from even enrolling in the contest or campaign, and an important opportunity to reach those who need the most support may be missed. Further, if participation is rewarded instead of results, everyone who participates is a winner, their confidence increases, and their belief that they can make healthy behavior changes (self-

efficacy) is enhanced. The contest or campaign can be the first step for many toward eventually making permanent behavior changes.

To summarize, individual lifestyle choices (behaviors) influence health and health care costs. Multi-faceted contests and campaigns can give people the opportunity to try out a new skill or activity. If participation is rewarded instead of results, everyone has the opportunity to be a winner, and the experience can be the first step toward developing a lasting healthy behavior.

Key Success Factors

Following are several key success factors for healthy lifestyle contests and campaigns:

- Everyone should have a chance to participate, from those who are already skilled, to those who are novices
- Rewards or incentives should be focused on participation rather than on results or outcomes
- Everyone should have a chance to earn the reward (win), not just those who achieve the best result (e.g., in a weight management contest, those who are at an ideal weight already, should have an opportunity to earn the same reward as those who lose weight, to reinforce their success at already practicing a healthy behavior)
- Long-term or multi-part contests can be used to reward maintenance of a goal (e.g., offer a reward to those who maintain weight lost in the first phase of a contest for six months, a year, or longer)
- Realize that participation in one contest or campaign rarely leads to behavior change that is permanent – several cycles of start-lapse-restart typically occur along the

way before a lasting behavior change is made; thus, multiple contests and events over time, are preferable

- A successful contest or campaign will also reach those who aren't currently practicing the behavior, but are willing to try because they believe they can earn the reward
- Programs should emphasize improvement of the current rather than needing to achieve what may seem like challenging goals; for example 'walking programs' can increase activity for all, while 10,000 steps a day is attainable for only a few; and increasing fruit/vegetable servings from 1 to 3 a day in a 'healthy eating program' is better than trying and failing to get to '5-a-day'
- The ideal contest or campaign will include a number of health-promoting elements and will reference other resources that are available to participants within the organization's health management program.



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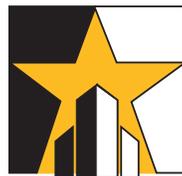
Dr. Noeldner is a Principal and Senior Consultant in the Health & Productivity Management (HPM) specialty practice of Mercer Health & Benefits. He works in the West Unit and is a national resource and expert in the areas of strategic planning, program design, behavior change and program evaluation. Dr. Noeldner has over 25 years of industry experience, which includes clinical practice in cardiac and pulmonary rehabilitation, hospital administration, university teaching, research, consulting, wellness programming, corporate HPM, and senior management roles.

Prior to joining Mercer, Dr. Noeldner was President of MindStrength Consulting, which specialized in behavior change consulting. He also managed HPM and employee benefits for Capital One Financial Services. Dr. Noeldner was previously the

President & COO of the Mid-Atlantic Fitness Network, which provided health promotion consulting and services to corporations, managed care organizations, governments and associations. As well, while a hospital administrator, he developed a comprehensive Health & Wellness Center and managed the Orthopaedic Services Program which included orthopaedic nursing, rehabilitative services (OT, PT, SLP), sports medicine clinics, and an Orthopaedic Research Laboratory.

Dr. Noeldner's education includes a M.S. in Adult Fitness – Cardiac Rehabilitation and a Ph.D. in Exercise Science with concentrations in Sport Psychology, Exercise Physiology, and Biomechanics. He is certified by the American College of Sports Medicine as a Program Director™, is a published author, and has served as a reviewer for the Journal of Cardiopulmonary Rehabilitation and for the Canadian Journal of Sports Medicine.

Dr. Noeldner's other experiences include developing and managing worksite health promotion programs; the development of proprietary data capture and analysis systems; development of predictive algorithms for incentive programs; and development of training programs using readiness to change models for behavior change coaching and counseling.



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