

Creating a Healthy Wellness

QUICK LOOK

- ⇒ You must establish a privacy policy and enforce it rigorously.
- ⇒ You must make sure everyone knows about your wellness initiative through repeat messaging in all three modes: online, print and on site.
- ⇒ Make sure employees have time to attend a health fair where health screenings are offered.

By David Langton, Langton Cherubino Group



Program

Wellness programs are on the lips of nearly all benefits and HR professionals these days. Studies show that comprehensive wellness programs can promote worker productivity while reducing health-care costs. But what does it take to start a successful workplace wellness program?

Just adding programs and services isn't enough. As Jennifer Arcure, creator of Pfizer's comprehensive wellness program, said, "It's not about programs, it's about communication and engagement."

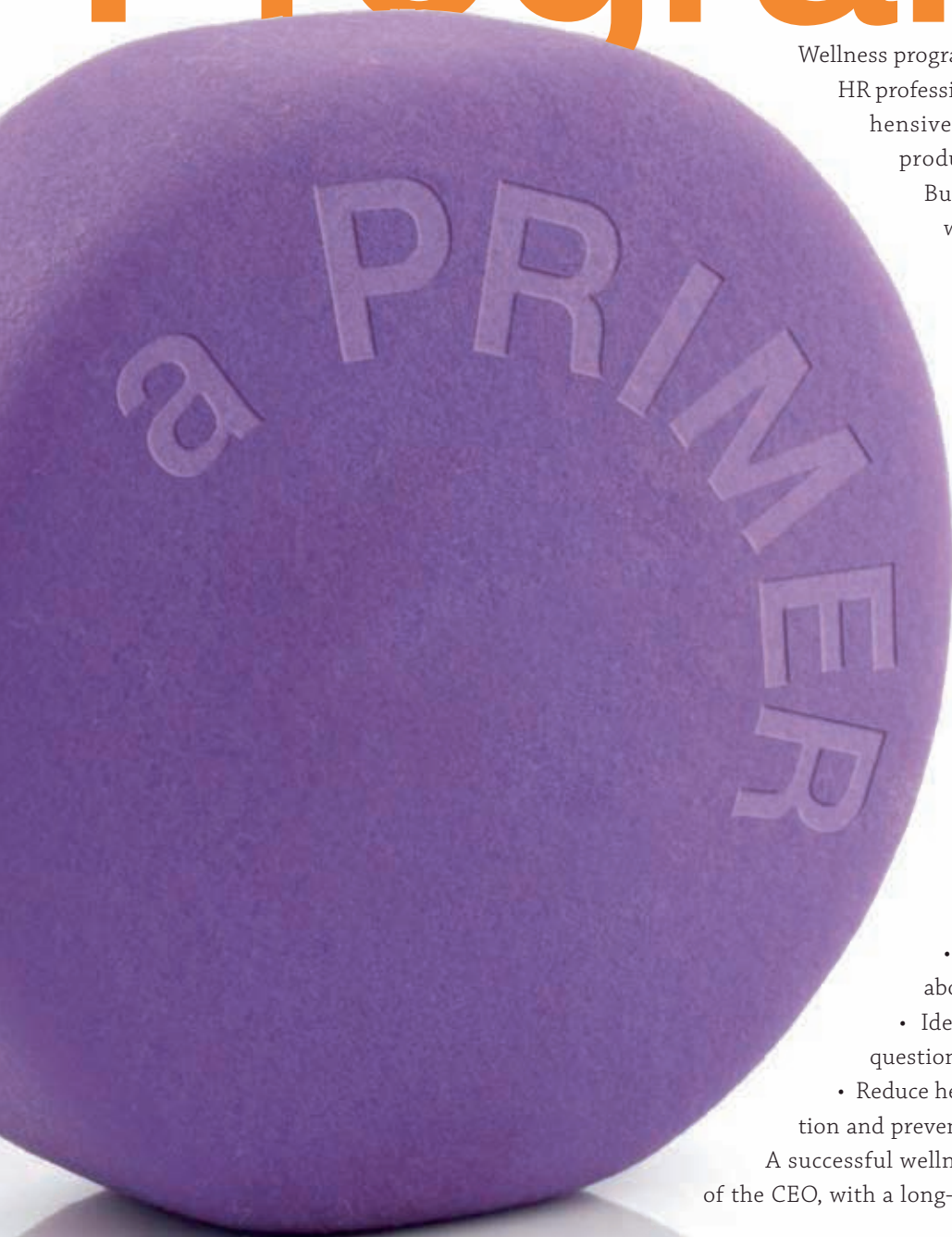
For a wellness initiative to work you must change employees' behavior, which takes time, repeat messaging and ongoing support to turn good intentions into actions and actions into habits that become a way of life.

What Effective Wellness Programs Do

What makes a wellness program effective? Here are some success factors:

- Reduce absenteeism and increase productivity from a healthier and happier workforce.
- Demonstrate that a company cares about its employees and build loyalty.
- Identify potential health risks through health questionnaires and then initiate preventive care.
- Reduce health-care costs as a result of early intervention and preventive care.


A successful wellness initiative requires the solid support of the CEO, with a long-term commitment. Employees must have



the time and the inclination to attend health fairs, have their blood pressure taken or even to see a doctor. Facilities should emphasize walking and offer healthy eating options as a starting point. Team spirit, friendly competition and an atmosphere that celebrates the achievements of healthy living are important. However, none of this will happen unless the CEO and management teams make it a priority for the company.

Following are the five phases of a successful wellness program:

- 1. Know.** First, you have to introduce the wellness program to the employees and their dependents. Employees need to *know* about the program and to *know* about their current health. This phase usually begins with a health fair and a series of communications: a) printed brochures, flyers, posters and tent cards; b) e-mails, Web sites, plasma screens and videos; and c) on-site exhibitions,



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presentations and live announcements. You must make sure everyone knows about your wellness initiative through repeat messaging in all three modes.

Another crucial aspect about the “know” phase is confidentiality. You must establish a privacy policy and enforce it rigorously. Employees must feel confident that no one — no other employees, supervisors nor management — will ever have access to their private health information. A third-party company should be designated to collect data. Doctor/patient confidentiality must be protected.

- 2. Engage.** The next step is *engagement*. Your initial launch should promote and excite employees about a new wellness program. Ideal responses would be, “I like being in a company that cares about me and my health,” or “Healthy living is hard to do by yourself; I appreciate any help I can get from my company,” or “Everyone can benefit from healthier lifestyle choices.”

Direct employees to a Web site to take a health questionnaire or health risk assessment. Offer immediate feedback with suggestions and recommendations on how to create healthier habits. Provide timely and relevant services. Make sure employees have time to attend a health fair where health screenings are offered, including blood tests, body mass index (BMI), and cholesterol and blood pressure screenings.

Use incentives to engage employees. Give away healthy snacks, health-care discounts or gift cards. Create excitement to engage employees in the programs. Have contests and other activities that motivate employees to participate.

- 3. Change.** The next phase is to *change* behavior. Creating new habits is a lot of work. Celebrate *change* with health ambassadors. There are always a few cheerleaders in the crowd that get excited about healthy living and are more than happy to share the news with others. Establish friendly competitions between work groups, locations, floors and departments.

4. Sustain. Most diets and exercise programs fail because they are too extreme. Participants are gung-ho, but they can’t *sustain* that change long term, and they slip back into the comfort of old habits. “We found we have to include a new promotion, a giveaway, a contest — something exciting to keep the program fresh every month,” said Katherine Brieger, vice president of quality services at Hudson River Health Care.


Employee testimonial campaigns are effective ways to reinforce new habits. You may develop a series of posters, plasma screens and short videos with real employee volunteers sharing a weight-loss story or a new exercise routine.

- 5. Report and Repeat.** Often this is the phase that is forgotten. You must report results — in broad strokes with companywide statistics, such as 75 percent of employees took the online health questionnaire, or in aggregate numbers that do not impinge on employee confidentiality.

You can create internal competitions, e.g., the sales vs. the accounting teams. Try creating a walking program that converts steps into miles, and see how many companywide miles are walked in a year.

Conclusion

The benefits of a successful wellness program are clear. The key to a successful wellness program is in the planning and implementation of a strong communications program. That would include repeat messaging in multiple streams: print, on site and online. In today's multimedia world, you must communicate consistently in all three areas. Information about a wellness program in the company newsletter, in a display in the cafeteria and delivered in an e-mail begins to break through the clutter of an employee's busy life. The opportunities to communicate have increased exponentially, but you are now competing with thousands of other initiatives. Therefore, your messaging must be clear, consistent and distinctive.

When a company promotes physical activity, healthy eating habits and stress management, and offers preventive health services, everyone wins. Employees and their families improve their own quality of life and health, while employers benefit from lower overall health expenses and increased productivity. 

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