

Social networking revitalizes wellness

SOCIAL NETWORKING TOOLS are taking workplace wellness programs in a new direction that emphasizes camaraderie and team spirit.

An increasing number of employers are using this strategy to boost the enrollment and retention rates for their wellness programs. Quite a few wellness vendors and health insurers have added social media to their platforms.

“We sure see it [as a trend] with our clients,” says Tom Abshire, senior vice-president of marketing for Virgin HealthMiles, a wellness program that incorporates social networking.

Instead of solitary efforts on the treadmill, social networking tools allow employees to exercise together, form teams and organize competitions. They trade tips, communicate about their progress and setbacks, and serve as a support system for each other.

“People influence each other’s health. Friends, spouses, coworkers and neighbors influence your health, positively and negatively. They’ll gain weight together. They’ll quit smoking together. Even their mental health is linked. It’s very powerful,” says Mike Zani, CEO of Shape Up the Nation, a wellness platform that relies heavily on social networking.

Health connectivity has a lot to do with peer pressure and accountability. “If you actually publish that you’re going for a five-mile run, you’re a whole lot more likely to do it,” Zani points out.

“Having it out there and knowing I just told 25 people that my goal is to walk a certain number of steps, that’s motivating to people because they feel a personal accountability,” Abshire agrees. “It’s the public articulation of my commitment to the program and to myself, which I think helps with retention. There’s a sense of camaraderie, as well.”

How it works

A growing number of employers are using blogs, Facebook pages, Twitter feeds, online message boards and podcasts to communicate about their health and wellness programs, encourage more employees to enrol, and improve the engagement level of participants.

Other employers are selecting wellness vendors and health insurers with social networking capabilities, instead of trying to create and maintain their own tools.



With Shape Up the Nation, users log on to an online platform, where they connect to colleagues, track their physical activity and post status updates. They can create affinity groups or networks. They choose who they connect to, and they can keep any piece of information private or public.

With Virgin HealthMiles, users upload data from a pedometer onto an online platform. They can connect with peers, set goals and invite a friend to a fitness challenge. For example, a group might set a goal to walk together every Friday at lunchtime or have a contest to see who can walk the most steps in a month. The program can show rankings within the group.

“The power of social networking is not about how big your network is. It’s about how relevant your network is,” Zani asserts. It should include the people who are best able to motivate you and influence your habits. That might be your office mate who knows you well enough to prod you when you haven’t been reporting your physical activity data.

Saint-Gobain, a manufacturer of glass and construction materials, uses a Twitter feed, online message boards, a blog and podcasts to communicate with employees about health and wellness programs.

“It really helps us drive participation. We don’t see any drawbacks to it,” says Vince Blando, wellness coordinator for Saint-Gobain. He believes social networking is the direction wellness is headed in. “For us, the social media thing is great because it costs almost nothing, and you get a lot of information out to a lot of people. We’d rather be ahead of the curve

and get as much information out to people as we can.”


“The initial feedback has been really positive. They see a usefulness to it,” Blando adds. “This lets them digest what we’re sending out more at their own pace. We definitely see the value. It can be such a huge payoff for such a minimal investment and risk.”

Using several different communication formats is part of a strategy to reach more employees. Someone who won’t listen to a podcast might be interested in a Twitter feed, or vice versa.

The law firm Michael Best started offering Virgin HealthMiles to its employees in 2008.

“We actually love the [health] challenges. They’re really great. It’s been helping me keep my enrollment really high,” says Vicky Seligmiller, benefits administrator for Michael Best. About 47% of employees at the firm enrolled in Virgin HealthMiles.

“They would discuss fun things they saw on the site, and everybody wanted to do it. It was a really great way to build a culture of wellness, which everybody wants,” Seligmiller notes. “Our employees enjoy having ways to spur each other on. They’re coming up with fun and creative team names.”

With social networking, “you don’t feel you’re alone. It’s not drudgery. It’s interactive camaraderie,” she adds. “It’s the way of the future. I have seen so much more appreciation of the [wellness] program and acceptance of it and enthusiasm for it. The [social media tools] are the differentiator.” 

Leah Shepherd is a freelance writer in Silver Spring, Md. and a co-author of *“The Three Rs of Employee Benefits: Recruiting, Retention and Rewards.”*

Tips for employers

1 Use social networking tools to promote your other health and wellness initiatives, such as a disease management program, health risk assessment or an annual health fair.

2 “Don’t be afraid to use this positive force, this healthy and relevant peer pressure,” Zani says. “Integrate these [health and wellness programs]. Don’t be afraid of using social networking to show them the programs that you’ve been offering for years.”

3 Also, don’t push too much of the cost of wellness programs on to the employees. “Don’t be pennywise and pound foolish,” Zani recommends.

4 Let employees use social media and build their virtual community in the way that makes the most sense to them, Abshire recommends. Otherwise, satisfaction with the program will drop, and participation will fade.

5 “It might not take right away. It becomes a cultural thing. You have to be patient. It’s going to take time,” Blando advises.

What do these people have in common?

Who’s Who in Workplace Health Awards Call for Nominations

They all made significant contributions to the field of workplace health and were winners of the Who’s Who in Workplace Health Awards.

This is your opportunity to recognize a colleague who has made significant changes in the design or management of an employee health benefits program, or has otherwise contributed to improvements in workplace health.

The deadline for entries is Wednesday June 30th, 2010.

Awards will be granted for outstanding achievement in each of five categories:

- Employer
- Employee Communication
- Employee Engagement **(NEW)**
- Strategic Partnership
- Provider Leadership

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