

▶ HEALTH AND WELLNESS

## COMPANIES KEEP WORKERS WELL BY EMPLOYING HEALTHY COMPETITION

BY LISA BEYER

**E**mployers are learning that wellness programs require much more to succeed than a pedometer and an occasional newsletter on healthier living. To achieve enduring changes in employee behavior, more companies are following a Wellness 2.0 strategy.

“In the past, an employer might sponsor a Biggest Loser contest or promote an employee walking program, which encouraged short-term activity, but didn’t change the culture long term,” says Cindy LaQuatra, a senior consultant with Benefits Resource Group, an employee benefits agency in Independence, Ohio. “Today’s programs focus on identifying and preventing costly health issues, offer financial rewards for participants, and more often than not have a social aspect.”

The level of sophistication is rising, judging from the results of the 2011 Health at Work Awards, which were sponsored by Chicago-based employee assistance programs provider ComPsych Corp. All the winners of this year’s awards, including Intel Corp. and GE Capital Fleet Services, use real-time, creative communications and video testimonials uploaded to a common portal by employees to promote wellness programs.

“When it comes to communicating with employees, companies face the same challenges they face when communicating with customers,” says Meredith Oliver, a social media expert and president of Raleigh, North Carolina-based Meredith Communications Inc. “Employees are wearing a lot of hats and are oftentimes distracted, so they tend to

tune out group emails and memos.”

Oliver says many people tend to think of social media as a consumer marketing tool. But social networking is an excellent communication tool for internal customers, too. “Whenever you can increase communication and camaraderie among employees, no matter what behavior or program you are driving,” Oliver says, “it’s going to enhance your effectiveness.”

Consultant Limeade Inc. of Belle-



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vue, Washington, provides social media-based wellness programs that allow employees to engage in healthy activities, take quizzes about health conditions such as diabetes or about nutritional food choices, and participate in challenges, including committing to eating five vegetables daily. They track their progress and share tips with colleagues through a portal. “Our programs are social, because the science of behavioral change shows that people make changes when they have support of friends and peers,” says Limeade CEO Henry Albrecht.

Health and wellness company Keas believes in making healthy living both social and fun. Last January, the San Francisco-based company launched an online, interactive game for employees to play 15 minutes a day. Using a Web-based program, employees can form teams and see each other’s progress; set goals for exercising, eating right and other healthy habits; and take quizzes and challenges to earn financial rewards. Goals are set each week and team members can cheer each other on with a messaging application similar to Facebook.

“The game offers three key benefits for an employer: employees develop healthier habits, morale is increased because of the team aspect, and pro-

ductivity increases as people feel better and get along better with co-workers,” says Adam Bosworth, the co-founder and chief technology officer at Keas.

Earlier this year, Keas ran a 12-week pilot program for the 1,000 employees of Chilton Hospital in Pompton Plains, New Jersey. More than 40 percent of eligible employees signed up, and of those, 79 percent participated in the program at least once, while 50 percent used the game site

for the full 12 weeks.

Almost 80 percent of participants lost weight, 45 percent reported that they had increased their intake of fruits and vegetables, and 37 percent and 50 percent reported increased exercise levels and reduced stress, respectively. What’s more, nearly two-thirds of the workers said playing the game increased their productivity.

At Bedford, Massachusetts-based Progress Software Corp., another Keas client, about 800 employees, or 50 percent of the workforce, are playing the game.

“I’m focused on employee engagement with wellness as a side benefit, and this was a good fit because our employees are smart and want to be involved with the latest technology,” says Joe Andrews, Progress Software’s senior vice president of human resources and chief compliance officer. The online game is “absolutely getting employees to exercise more and has driven down health care costs.”

“You don’t have to be physically fit to play,” Andrews adds. “You are trying to improve on where you are now. There are a lot of interesting wellness programs, but this is the first one I’ve found that focuses on engaging employees.”

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