

Strategic commentary

How to effectively use ‘carrots’ in your wellness program

Thought leaders share their views on the HR profession and its direction for the future

Jason Mauser

You know the drill – your company creates a wellness program but participation is lackluster from the beginning or after a few months have lapsed. Think about it: how long do New Year’s resolutions last? A week or a month? People tend to get sidetracked as the year passes by, and the same disinterest can also impact wellness programs after employees sign-up. Employees may start with good intentions, but unless they are regularly rewarded with the right rewards – or “carrots” – their participation may wane or even die off completely.

A Hawk Incentives study that focused on employee happiness^[1] found that 47 per cent of employees want wellness rewards but only 32 per cent of employers offer them; the research also found that the number of employees who would participate in wellness programs nearly quadruples when rewards are offered. To bolster participation in your wellness program, try leveraging rewards and incentives to drive engagement – here’s how.

Engage and reward: quickly and often

Sparking involvement right out of the gate can set the tone for an active wellness program. It is not enough for employees to simply sign-up; the aim

should be to keep them engaged. Employees want to be rewarded and incented for their behavior, and delivering rewards (quickly!) can provide regular reminders of the behavior(s) that led to the reward in the first place. There are a variety of ways to do this, whether using on-the-spot rewards in person, sending e-gifts or shooting over a swift email. If a reward takes too long to be delivered, your company runs the risk of employees forgetting about it or losing interest in working toward more rewards in the future. Consider offering smaller, frequently delivered rewards to encourage participation on a regular basis. These “micro” rewards can enable your organization to create a steady stream of recognition and interaction that keeps your employees engaged. If your wellness program offers point-based rewards through accrual, keep in mind that employees should be able to cash out their points at any time. This will help prevent frustration and provide immediate rewards that associate your program with positive engagement.

Provide the rewards employees want

Your employees aren’t all the same and aren’t going to agree on the single best reward they’d like to



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receive, so why not give them options to choose the reward they want most? According to a reward preference survey conducted by Hawk Incentives, people want choice more than any specific reward[2] no matter their demographic. People prefer choice, and gift cards and prepaid cards are a favorite among employees for that very reason. With the right assortment of cards, you can easily create a universe of choice delivered through an array of reward cards that vary in where they can be redeemed, how they are received and more. Offering this kind of variety eliminates generic, cookie cutter options that may not resonate with your employees or drive the healthy behavior your wellness program aims to encourage. Creating this mix of card options does not have to be a hassle for employers; card solution partners can create customized selections that are likely to satisfy a variety of tastes and preferences. An absence of uniformity in your wellness reward mix is a good thing.

Tailor rewards to different types of participation

Some companies may approach wellness programs as a means to encourage some employees to take their first steps toward making healthy choices, but while this audience is

definitely important, it is not the only one to consider. Employees who live healthy lifestyles prior to joining your wellness program can be invaluable assets for a variety of reasons. Those who show a personal interest in their health outside of work can help spur program participation among their peers, foster program support and promote programs from within. For instance, large, de-centralized companies that have offices across the country or even the world may find it difficult to remotely engage wellness program participants. But having “insider” advocates who are enthusiastic about wellness can help incent other employees get actively involved – satisfying both types of participants in different ways. Involving a spectrum of employees, no matter how healthy their lifestyles are when they join your program, can create an atmosphere of inclusiveness and increase the effectiveness of your wellness program.

The ultimate goals of wellness programs are to keep employees healthy, happy and engaged – yet only 42 per cent of employees are satisfied with their employer-sponsored programs¹. When done right, the benefits of wellness programs can stretch beyond keeping employees healthy; they

can also boost morale, reduce absenteeism, increase retention, improve work performance, reduce healthcare costs for employers and employees, drive sales and even increase loyalty. You can do your company and your employees a favor by providing the right rewards to incent their wellness program engagement and participation to create a win-win situation for everyone.

Notes

1. “The Happiness Study” was an internet-based survey conducted in 2015 by Hawk Incentives. The sample size included 1,851 respondents in the United States.
2. Source: A Hawk Incentives Rewards Preference survey of 1,022 smartphone owning Americans was completed by Leger online between February 10 and 28, 2017. A probability sample of the same size would yield a margin of error of $\pm 3.07\%$, 19 times out of 20.

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