

SMALL **Business Times**

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Don't make wellness a budget casualty

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As the economy tightens, America's small businesses are struggling with ways to respond to today's market conditions. In a recent Milwaukee Biz Blog, Steve Jagler, executive editor of Small Business Times, referenced a new poll of 516 small-business owners across the United States conducted by management consulting firm George S. May International.

In the survey, American small-business owners ranked the following issues as the most important to them: the economy (23 percent); health care (20 percent); taxes (17 percent); the Iraq war (15 percent); energy (12 percent); housing (7 percent); and immigration (5 percent).

With health care ranked as the second-highest concern and, for many employers the second-highest cost, it seems imperative that efforts to keep the workforce healthy and productive should continue, despite serious concerns about credit, budgets and cash flow.

In years past, doing wellness programs on nominal budgets and sometimes at no cost was common. Staff and practitioners got by on minimal dollars, health fairs, creativity and free community programs.

But without financial investment in incentives and outside resources, employee participation, improvement in health and reduction in health costs were negligible.

Fueled by the rising cost of health insurance benefits and growing evidence of return on investment, employers became committed to improving the health of their workforce as a core business strategy, and dollars for wellness programs were allocated in the overall financial strategy.

We shouldn't and hopefully won't return to zero-budget programs, but how do we keep worksite wellness a high priority when maintaining cash flow, getting credit to expand or meeting payroll will be challenging?

While budgeting is still a critical part of a successful business program, there are resources that can help cut back on costs during these tough economic times.

The Worksite Wellness Resource Kit is a project of the Wisconsin Partnership for Physical Activity Program, Diabetes Prevention and Control Program, Heart Disease and Stroke Program, Comprehensive Cancer Program and Arthritis Program. The kit, available through the Wisconsin Department of Health, provides information to implement a broad range of strategies and wellness programming, including some that require very little or no resources. The kit shows ways to get started and make a difference in the health of employees, regardless of the size of the worksite and its available resources.

Unlike many other resource kits, the focus is on reducing the risk factors to chronic disease, poor nutrition, inactivity, mental health and tobacco use. The kit provides worksites with a step-by-step guide to use in (1) getting started; (2) assessing their worksite; (3) identifying what types of activities to implement; (4) linking to valuable information on how to implement strategies; and (5) determining ways to measure effectiveness.

Because the strategies in the kit are arranged by low, medium and high resource needs, companies can get a quick glance at what they might be able to quickly implement, and what might take more time or be too costly to include at a particular time. The three levels indicate the relative amount of staff and finances needed. The kit is available through the Wisconsin Department of Health for no charge at <http://dhs.wisconsin.gov/health/physicalactivity/Sites/Worksitekit.htm>.

Other low-budget options include:

- Affordable options for communicating and marketing your wellness program can include an in-house wellness newsletter; a wellness column or page in an existing corporate newsletter or memos on wellness issues.
- Other effective wellness communication tools include the following:
- Piggy-backing wellness messages at the end of employee meetings.
- Free health information pamphlets to employees.
- Free health films obtained from local libraries and industry sources.
- A free employee health-lending library.
- Low-cost or free health posters available through health and insurance providers.
- Self-quizzes on health topics to test employee knowledge.

If the budget doesn't provide the funds needed for company-wide health risk assessments here are some examples of low-cost health and fitness testing that can be offered at the worksite: voluntary agency blood pressure screening; use of a self-scored health risk appraisal; free on-line health risk appraisals, nutrition or physical fitness monitoring, distribution of recommendations on preventive medical screening tests; employee health fairs using community health agencies; promotion of community-based health and fitness programs; use of fitness tests as part of a health fair or company picnic; and creating a wellness-oriented work environment to support overall wellness goals.

Examples of low-cost environmental changes include:

- Offering healthier food and drink options in vending machines.
- Asking employees to donate unused home exercise equipment for employee break rooms.
- Posting nutritional information in the corporate cafeteria or lunch rooms.
- Providing fresh fruit for employee meeting breaks.
- Requiring employees to use seatbelts in company vehicles.
- Marking distances on walking trails near corporate buildings and distributing a list of suggested break time walks to employees.
- Negotiating with local fitness and health clubs to provide discounts for fitness and health clubs memberships.