

Overview

Alberta Blue Cross has a genuine commitment to fostering a healthy workplace and supporting the health of our employees. Studies have shown that promoting wellness in the workplace is one of the best investments an employer can make—bringing immediate dividends through reduced absenteeism due to illness and increased productivity due to better health. Alberta Blue Cross had previously launched a stair-climbing initiative in 2011. However, as workplace wellness has been added as part of our organization's strategic plan with a goal of being the healthiest organization in Alberta, I was asked to develop a wellness campaign for employees that would clearly show the importance the organization places on workplace wellness.

Research

To establish what employees really wanted in a wellness program, I conducted secondary qualitative and quantitative research; analyzing survey results from the previous stair-climbing campaign. I also searched online to see what other companies did for employee wellness programs—specifically, what areas of wellness they focused on and what was successful. One of the challenges I faced was creating a wellness program that employees could participate in that would encompass various fitness levels and could be done anytime during the work day. A number of employees at Alberta Blue Cross work in various call centres, which do not allow for flexibility in their daily work schedules, many employees take breaks at various times throughout the day and some employees work in branch office locations so the program needed to be flexible enough to allow all employees to participate.

Stakeholder analysis

My research showed that in the past campaign while employees appreciated and enjoyed various wellness activities, many were not able to participate due to a number of factors which included being too busy at work, they did not feel they were at the fitness level to use stairs instead of the elevators or did not want to change into fitness clothes to get active during a work day. From this, I decided to take a more fundamental approach towards wellness—to encourage employees to just get moving. I would focus this internal campaign on personal challenges so every employee, regardless of fitness level, age or time constraints, could make small improvements in their activity level during work hours. My research further illustrated the notion that if employees were introduced to non-intimidating wellness activities that they could do at any time during the day, they would most likely continue with these once the campaign ended. To identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of my proposed campaign, I performed a SWOT analysis (see *appendix one*).

The target audience was more than 1,000 Alberta Blue Cross employees, which included employees at six branch offices across Alberta. The employee audience ranges from executive and professionals to entry-level. Our workforce is made up of 70 per cent women with 85 per cent of staff aged 26 to 56.

Goals and objectives

The overall **business goal** was to illustrate the importance the organization places on workplace wellness as part of our organization's strategic plan. My overall **communications goal** was to encourage increased physical activity in Alberta Blue Cross employees in a way that fostered a healthier lifestyle for the purpose of creating healthier employees, which in turn, creates a healthier organization. The following outlines the specific communications objectives of the wellness program:

- Primary objective:
 - My primary communications objective was to change attitudes of employees by altering the mainly negative perception of exercise at work as measured through informal feedback taken throughout the challenge, through personal wellness stories from employees and through a formal employee survey at the end of the formal campaign (see *appendix four*).
- Secondary objectives:
 - To obtain over 40 per cent of employee participation as measured through the number of employees that registered for the program against the total number of employees employed at Alberta Blue Cross.
 - To build or sustain the level of employee activity created by the program, as measured through the number of attendees in the on-site fitness classes when the program ends as compared to the number of attendees participating in fitness classes prior to the wellness program.
 - To build or sustain a level of corporate focus on employee wellness as measured by a continued focus on health and wellbeing through participation in future wellness initiatives.

Planning and execution

I served as the communications lead on this project, from research and inception to roll-out, providing ongoing communications support, developing the communications plan and implementing the tactics to ensure the goals and objectives were met. Other

members of the project team included four Human Resources staff, a graphic designer, a web designer and administrative support. My total budget for the wellness program was \$20,000; however, as a not-for-profit, we are responsible for keeping costs as low as possible. My budget included expenses for customized T-shirts, water tumblers, gift cards and challenge prizes. All printing and paper supplies were provided through existing corporate supplies and all communication material was produced by in-house staff (see *appendix three* for a detailed listing of expenses, resource allocation and budget).

To successfully meet the goals and objectives for the target audience, I planned a comprehensive communication strategy for the program. *Wellness Challenge 2013 ... make it your own* launched in the first week of March 2013 to over 1,000 Alberta Blue Cross employees in six different locations across Alberta. The program concluded on May 30, 2013. While structured, this campaign still offered adaptability for employees of all fitness levels. In consultation with our Human Resources department, I planned activities that were appropriate for a wide range of fitness and activity levels. The importance of just getting moving was stressed in this program. Any increase in activity was seen as a good thing and celebrated. Working with an in-house designer, all aspects of the campaign were communicated through posters (see *appendix seven*), newsletter articles (see *appendix six*), on our employee intranet and through email. One area of concern I had was management support of employees participating in the program during work hours. I approached our president and CEO and suggested that a memo sent from him to the management team would help reinforce the importance the company places on wellness. He agreed and a memo was sent electronically to management expressing the organization's support of the program along with his expectation that managers find a way to encourage staff participation in activities during work hours. This helped demonstrate the strong support and dedication Alberta Blue Cross executives had with improving workplace wellness.

To appeal to a wider demographic, I introduced a number of wellness initiatives during the program, rather than designing the program around one main element as the previous stair-climbing initiative had. The campaign activities and prizes aligned with a number of themes that were introduced during the program: hydration, nutrition, physical activity and the importance of sleep. The program was broken down into the following components:

Indoor walking circuit

The root of all successful wellness programs start with small steps so, to kick off the challenge, two indoor walking circuits were created that covered two of the three Alberta Blue Cross buildings in Edmonton. It combined stairs and flat surfaces, offering a full and short version of the circuit to appeal to all fitness levels and to offer an option for those who didn't have enough time in their work day to complete the full circuit. Branch employees were encouraged to create their own indoor walking circuits using the available indoor areas at their offices. A logbook was available for employees to sign whenever they completed the circuit to be entered in a weekly draw for a prize. Fitness trivia and motivational posters were displayed throughout the circuits to encourage participants to keep moving (see *appendix eight*). As well, stretch station posters (see *appendix eight*) were posted along the routes that showcased easy stretches employees could do during the circuit or during the workday while waiting for the elevators.

Branch employee activities

The majority of employees work out of our Edmonton offices; however, to ensure branch employees could participate, I had to modify some of the activities. For the indoor walking circuit, we encouraged employees to create their own modified circuits based on the indoor space they had available at their offices. They emailed us when they completed a circuit and we entered them in the weekly draws. We also encouraged the branch employees to start their own outdoor walking clubs and email us the names of participants each day to be entered in the draws. We also introduced "branch" specific draws where each week we took all the names of the branch employees who emailed us wellness updates and/or wellness stories and put them in a special draw for a weekly prize.

Wellness Challenge Fair

Midpoint through the Wellness Challenge, I planned and executed a Wellness Challenge Fair that took place at our Edmonton office location. This health-oriented fair was an employee event that featured on-site fitness class demonstrations; an interactive display about the importance of sleep; a cardiovascular display that included a blood pressure clinic put on by the Heart and Stroke Foundation; and a presentation by Heidi Bates, a local nutritionist. All employees who signed up to participate in the Wellness Challenge received a free T-shirt and water tumbler, which were available for pickup at the fair. Since branch employees could not participate in this event, we mailed the T-shirts and water tumblers to them. We also posted the Heidi Bates presentation on our intranet so they could watch it.

Wellness challenges between teams and departments

A department fit-break challenge was introduced as part of the Wellness Challenge. Departments, teams and groups of employees anywhere in the province were invited to let us know what they were doing to stay active while at work. Some departments did dance breaks, others participated in the walking circuit together and some took on-site employee fitness classes

together. All participating teams were entered in a draw where the winners enjoyed a healthy catered breakfast.

Amazing Race wellness game

To add a fun, competitive challenge to the program, I introduced the Alberta Blue Cross Amazing Race—a marathon of wellness challenges. Employee teams were tasked with a new a wellness challenge each week (for a month). Teams earned points for successfully completing the challenges. Modified from the popular reality television show, *The Amazing Race*, an assortment of challenges were designed that involved fitness, nutrition, creativity and teamwork. The challenges included a smoothie blend off, a modified indoor walking circuit team challenge, an online health puzzle challenge, a food bank collection challenge and a mystery on-site fitness class challenge. Team points were tracked on our employee intranet, with the winning team receiving a free healthy catered lunch at the end of the game. Branch employees who chose to participate received modified challenges.

Outdoor walking club

To dispel any program fatigue employees could have experienced in the third month of the program, I introduced an exciting new element—an outdoor walking club. Each day in May, rain or shine, Alberta Blue Cross fitness instructors led employees on a 20 to 30-minute outdoor walk. Participants were encouraged to sign a logbook after each walk for a weekly draw. Branch employees were encouraged to conduct their outdoor walks and email us daily to be included in the weekly draw.

Results/evaluation

Being a new program for employees, evaluation was essential to determine if the wellness direction we were taking aligned with our corporate goal. Over 500 employees participated in Wellness Challenge. And, while we measured success through participation levels, I did perform a qualitative evaluation through informal feedback and a survey that was conducted a week after the program wrapped up. The survey resulted in 95 per cent of survey participants indicating they enjoyed the Wellness Challenge, 96 per cent indicating they thought it appealed to all fitness levels and 99 per cent found it a valuable step towards employee wellness (see *appendix four* for complete survey results). The overwhelming success of Wellness Challenge 2013 helped Alberta Blue Cross achieve its business goal of illustrating the importance the organization places on workplace wellness as part of our organization's strategic plan.

As a way to measure the success of our primary communications objective (changing attitudes of employees by altering the mainly negative perception of exercise at work), we encouraged employees to email us personal fitness stories and personal progress throughout the Wellness Challenge. The response was overwhelming, with hundreds of employees sending in positive personal stories, daily wellness initiatives and future wellness goals (see *appendix four*).

We also measured the success of the program by calculating employee participation, which was measured through the number of employees that registered for the program against the total number of employees employed at Alberta Blue Cross. Our goal was to obtain at least 40 per cent employee participation; we surpassed this goal with 59 per cent of Alberta Blue Cross employees registering for Wellness Challenge (over 500 participants). Our secondary goal was to build or sustain the level of employee activity created by the program. This was measured through the number of attendees in the on-site fitness classes when the program ended as compared to the number of attendees participating in fitness classes prior to Wellness Challenge. After the completion of Wellness Challenge, the number of employees attending fitness classes increased by 11 per cent. These numbers have stayed consistent since the end of the organized Wellness Challenge.

The success of the program was further reiterated at the 2013 Alberta Blue Cross staff assembly where Alberta's associate minister of wellness, Dave Rodney, delivered a thoughtful video greeting to our employees. During his speech, he described and thanked Alberta Blue Cross for being a "leader in promoting health and wellness among Albertans ... and setting a fantastic example for workplaces across Alberta." He ended his speech by stating that he "had seen many of those blue shirts from your Wellness Challenge over the past couple months around the Legislature. So I know you are getting out and getting active." To further celebrate the success of the program, a video chronicling the various aspects of the Wellness Challenge was created and played at the staff assembly (see *appendix five*).

Next steps

To continue to build and sustain a level of corporate focus on employee wellness, Alberta Blue Cross followed up with other health-related activities over the past year including individual fitness assessments that were conducted in June 2013, as well as re-assessments that were conducted in January 2014. Alberta Blue Cross continues to look at other ways to promote employee wellness. The motivational stairwell posters were so well received that our president and CEO requested permanent framed posters be placed in all stairwells. These posters are changed on a quarterly basis to keep employees motivated throughout the year. Due to an increase in fitness class attendance since the Wellness Challenge, more classes have been added to focus on every level of fitness and various interests such as dance and low-impact stretching. The classes have also expanded to include more after work options as opposed to primarily morning and lunch hour.