White paper

Best practices for implementing healthier vending options at the worksite

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Companies of all sizes are increasingly focused on worksite wellness initiatives to improve productivity and help reign in healthcare costs. However, health initiatives don’t have to involve measures such as installing a fitness center, launching a large-scale onsite weight-loss program, or catering healthy meals every day — because those strategies are simply not feasible for a majority of worksites.

Rather, employers can improve employee health by making small changes that ultimately create a culture of wellness in the workplace. Since workers spend one-third of their day at work, making changes to the environment that help support them in being physically active or making healthier food choices can be an effective strategy. With a supportive environment, employees are empowered to learn about healthy habits, and develop and maintain them at both work and at home.

One environmental change available to employers, which can be implemented at minimal or no cost, is to increase the availability of healthier food options in vending machines. Vending machines are offered in most workplaces. However, in most cases, food and beverage offerings are not regulated for health and nutrient content. As a result, vending machine selections often contain high levels of unhealthy fats, calories, sodium, and added sugar — options that far exceed the federal government’s recommended Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Even small changes in the availability of healthier items in vending machines can help employees.

In this paper, we provide a few best practices for implementing healthier vending options at your worksite.

1. Establish the business case for healthier vending in order to secure support and buy-in from senior leadership

In the United States, nearly 79 million adults, or one-third, are obese, which is a risk factor for heart disease, diabetes, and other chronic diseases.¹ One of the most pivotal factors contributing to obesity is an unhealthy, nutrient-poor diet.

While many factors influence what people choose to eat and drink, the availability of healthier options plays a critical role. By providing easier access to healthier choices, employers can play a key role in promoting healthy behavior and choices that can affect employees’ obesity, along with their risk for disease and chronic conditions.

It’s estimated that obesity costs employers more than $73 billion annually in higher healthcare costs and lower productivity.² On average, obese workers are absent a week more each year than other employees. To combat these challenges, it is imperative to educate and encourage employees to make healthier choices about what to eat while at work.

Workplace food options can significantly encourage a culture of wellness and communicate the importance of consuming a healthy diet. By stocking nutritious, balanced items in vending machines, employers of all sizes, industries, and cultures have an opportunity to establish practices for their employees that counteract the factors affecting obesity. The effort can also convey to workplace visitors that they are visiting a modern and health-conscious environment.

Most importantly, people are looking for healthier snack options.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>57% of consumers</th>
<th>want snacks that contain vitamins and minerals</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>52%</td>
<td>want additional health benefits beyond nutrition (e.g., antioxidants)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49%</td>
<td>want a serving of fruit and vegetables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48%</td>
<td>look for a snack that is high in fiber.³</td>
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2016 State of the Snack Food Industry report
2. Draft a comprehensive policy that helps promote easier access to healthier vending options

Changing the workplace wellness environment can be either an active or passive process. Creating a policy is a way to make the process an active one. A policy can work to change individual factors, such as knowledge of how to choose healthy options, social factors, such as social norms, and environmental factors, such as access to healthy options.³

To be successful with a healthy vending initiative, organizations should first draft an effective policy for food and beverage vending and procurement (if applicable) that includes evidence-based nutrition standards. They should then incorporate these policies into their food and beverage vendor contracts and bids.

3. Recognize that changing your vending options doesn’t need to be an immediate all-or-nothing approach

Rather than completely eliminating or restricting all choices, the goal should be to expand the number of healthier choices, while making them more appealing and affordable. One way to do this is to set a goal for the percentage of healthier choices that you want to achieve. For example, many organizations aim for 50% of offerings to be healthier, but percentages may range from as low as 25% to as high as 100%, depending on the policy and how receptive you feel your employees will be. Many advocates regard 50% healthy vending as an important incremental step toward an eventual goal of 100% healthy vending.⁷

Note that setting an overly ambitious percentage of healthy products too early could backfire, as employees need time to adapt to the changes. A more gradual approach, with increases phased in over time, can be one strategy.⁸ This allows your vendors to adapt, while your promotion efforts help attract new customers. For your vendors, emphasizing healthy vending options is a way to expand the customer base, maintain profitability, and lead the trend toward healthier environments. Survey your current vending machine environment and take inventory of your offerings to examine areas where you can make improvements.

4. Consider launching your initiative with a focus on beverages only

One option for easing into a healthier vending initiative is focusing only on beverages. Limiting access to sugar-sweetened beverages is of particular importance, as they are the largest source of added sugar and an important contributor of calories in the U.S. diet.⁹ Employers often find that employees embrace water and 100% juice as options.¹⁰ For example, a six-month healthy vending pilot in three Delaware state agency buildings showed that in one location, sale of unhealthy beverages dropped from 75% of the units sold to 38%, while the overall units sold during those months increased.¹¹
A 2014 Harris Interactive study on beverage consumption trends showed that consumption of bottled water at work increased dramatically over a one-year period, outpacing all other beverages. During the same period, coffee consumption held steady overall, while there was a drop in soda, iced tea, hot chocolate, and specialty coffee drinks.¹²

For those concerned about packaging waste, there are ways to make a healthy beverage program environmentally responsible. For example, employers may want to consider installing filtered water stations, or infused water stations with dispensers for beverages such as coffee, tea, or juice, and encouraging employees to use refillable containers.

“One of the biggest overarching trends in the global beverage market is that consumers are trading traditional carbonated soft drinks for ‘better for you’ alternatives amid rising concerns over obesity.”¹³

— Vending Times

5. Spend time on the 4Ps to get them right, and set the stage for your initiative to succeed

**Product:** When making product selections, obtain employee input from the beginning. Conduct a survey about the food and beverages they would like to see and what choices they might suggest eliminating. Consult with your vendor to learn more about their experiences with other customers regarding foods and beverages employees have embraced. Offer taste tests to employees to help determine which healthier products will work best in your various facilities; different choices may work best in different buildings.

According to a 2016 vending industry report, snacks categorized as nutritious showed the largest increase for revenue (31.7%) in 2015.¹⁴ The report concluded, “This growth is unsurprising as consumers are moving toward certain types of healthier snacks and alternative options. Nuts and seeds also did well, as did food snacks, both growing more than 20% in revenue.”

**Pricing:** When revamping vending machine offerings, be aware that healthier food options can sometimes be more expensive. One option is to consider subsidizing part of this higher cost in order to remove barriers that employees may perceive when considering healthier snacks.

It’s important to set the price of healthier options competitively, meaning at or below the price of similar items that do not meet the nutrition standards. Research shows that 62% of consumers look for snacks at a low price point.⁴

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**Promotion:** Before changing the offerings in the vending machines, ensure you have a detailed plan for promoting the initiative and educating employees about their expanded options. Develop or adopt promotional materials to prepare employees for the change and to draw new customers to the updated vending machines. Include prominent signage on or near vending machines, clearly identifying the items that meet the nutrition standards outlined in your policy. Some healthy vending models provide their own flyers, stickers, and other materials to promote the new, healthy options in the machines.

After one company in Des Moines implemented a full-scale campaign, which involved labeling information, product sampling, and incentives, sales of healthy foods in its vending machines increased by 60%.¹⁶

Remember, it’s all about increasing consumer choice by expanding access to healthier snack and beverage options. To get buy-in from employees, identify key employees and champions to help spread your message, and emphasize that you are making employee health a priority. Promote the viewpoint of “providing additional healthy snacks because we care” rather than “taking away delicious snacks.”¹⁷
Placement: Place healthier food and drinks at eye level and less healthy choices on the bottom shelf. Use promotional space on the machines to advertise a healthier choice.

6. Collaborate closely with your vending machine provider(s) from the beginning

Engage your current vendor in the process from the very beginning and ask what healthier options are available. With the increased demand, many vending companies and manufacturers have increasingly expanded their selections of healthier food and beverages. Some products that your vendor already stocks may meet your nutrition standards; they just need to be labeled and promoted as such. If your current vendor is not able or willing to provide an expanded selection, you may want to consider a specialty vendor.

You may also need to include implementation language in your vending contracts. The Public Health Law Center notes, “Existing food and beverage contracts can present both challenges and opportunities in transitioning to a new policy. An existing contract could dictate the timeframe for implementing a new policy, depending on when the contract expires and whether the contract allows flexibility to change product specifications. An organization could choose to negotiate with current vendors to phase in healthier options before the contract ends. In recognition of the fact that market demand for healthier food products has been growing significantly, more and more vendors have both the capacity and willingness to work with customers who wish to offer healthier product mixes. If contracts are short-term or ending soon, an organization may decide to wait to negotiate new contracts incorporating the policy language, or request bids that incorporate the new policy, until the contracts are up for renewal. Just remember that contracts trump internal policies, unless those policies are expressly incorporated into the contracts.”

It should also be noted that the Food and Drug Administration established requirements for certain vending businesses that will be effective in December of 2016. The rules implement the vending machine food labeling provisions of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010. Under the new requirements, calorie declarations will be required for food products sold from onsite vending machines, allowing purchasers to make a more informed decision before purchase.

Note: Some states may have their own vending regulations; your vending operator will likely be aware of your individual state’s laws and standards.

“The declaration of accurate and clear calorie information for food sold from vending machines will make calorie information available to consumers in a direct and accessible manner to enable consumers to make informed and healthful dietary choices.”
— U.S. Food and Drug Administration

7. As with any initiative, thorough evaluation is key

Monitor the implementation of your policy along the way. Ensure your vendors are tracking pricing and sales data to help identify consumer preferences and the shift toward healthier consumption. Survey your employees about the changes and how they feel about them. With solid data in hand, you can adapt and make changes as necessary, and know when the timing is right to take the next gradual step in increasing the percentage of healthier options.

Additional resources

There are many resources and toolkits available to help promote and enhance onsite vending options. Toolkits offer information to help employers and vending purchasers understand the value of increasing the availability and affordability of healthier foods in their workplaces and organizations. Aside from the use of vending machines, many companies offer onsite food trucks, farmers markets, cafés, or sponsored business meals to employees. Guidelines and recommendations addressing other food vending areas of practice are available depending on size and scope.
Specific to nutritional standards for healthier snack and beverage options, there are several models available for employers to use, as listed here.

**Resources:**

**Healthy vending nutritional standards**

- [Health and Sustainability Guidelines for Federal Concessions and Vending Operations](#): for consumers older than age 18
- [Nutritional Environment Measures Survey - Vending (NEMS-V)](#): matches the Health and Sustainability Guidelines for Federal Concessions and Vending Operations
- [Healthy Vending Guide — Nemours](#): categorizes foods and beverages by their nutrient density as “GO,” “SLOW,” and “WHOA” products
- [Fit Pick®](#): a healthy vending program created by the National Automatic Merchandising Association (NAMA)
- [National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity (NANA)](#): model beverage and food vending machine standards
- [American Heart Association](#): Healthy Workplace Food and Beverage Toolkit

**Summary**

Making healthy changes in the workplace environment can help cultivate social norms that foster healthier choices and behaviors. By making a conscientious decision to stock healthier options, companies can take a positive step toward engaging employees and supporting them to make healthier choices that can ultimately help lead to a happier and more productive workforce.

**How can we help?**

To learn more about onsite vending and workplace nutrition, contact your local Wells Fargo Insurance sales executive.
Sources

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