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Employee Health and Wellness... Priority One

Keeping employees healthy has become the primary workforce issue in 2009, up from the No. 2 position in 2008, according to Lincolnshire, Illinois-based Hewitt's survey, *The Road Ahead: Emerging Health Trends 2009*.

Employers are promoting health and wellness initiatives in large part because a healthy workforce translates to lower health plan expenses. And because employees are healthier, those lower expenses continue over time. However, according to a 2007 Hay Group Study, company wellness programs have less than a 25% participation rate.

Most health and wellness programs are not living up to their potential. Employers want to improve health outcomes of their employees and manage health care costs at the same time. However, with only 25% of employees participating in wellness programs, there is clearly room for improvement.

A well-designed communications strategy is a key ingredient to the success of any wellness program. BeneCom's experience in wellness communications – from campaign branding and promotion to media creation development and deployment – will help you to engage employees, keep them motivated, and give them the encouragement they need to get – and stay -- involved.

What more can you do to boost your wellness program's success rate?

Wellness Program Steps to Success:

- **Creating your wellness program plan design**

To actually reduce health care costs, employees have to adopt healthy behaviors and keep their health risks low. Use both short-term and long-term design elements.

Health fairs, health screenings and health risk assessments are a good place to start your program. Flu shots, cancer screenings, weight loss and diabetes control programs are also cost effective and valued by employees. All can result in health care savings in a short amount of time.

- **Communicate, communicate, communicate**

Once you've developed your wellness program elements, you need to create a compelling communication campaign. Research has shown that wellness programs succeed only when employees know what's available and how to get involved. If employees don't participate you don't want it to be because they didn't know how, when and where to take part! Keep your messages simple and concise, easy to read, understand and act upon. Also, use different methods of communicating based on what is effective for your audience.

An affordable first step in your communications plan is an employee health and wellness newsletter. When delivered via email or website, costs are kept to a minimum. But no matter how you communicate with employees, you are telling them that you care about them, their families and their health and well-being.

Wellness Program Steps to Success, *continued*:

- **Understanding your audience**

Who is your audience? In addition to your employees and their dependents, you may have others who are not actively at work but who are covered under your medical plan. COBRA participants, employees on leave and retirees are groups often overlooked but very critical to any cost savings your wellness plan may realize.

Think about what motivates these different categories of covered people. What is the best way to communicate with them? For example, would your retirees be more likely to read a paper newsletter than an article posted on a Web site? If so, then a low tech and high touch approach would be more effective.

- **How to measure success: Look at both quantitative and qualitative results**

A comprehensive wellness strategy includes goals, a multi-year strategy and metrics to measure return on investment (ROI). Wellness programs should help improve the health and productivity of employees while delivering financial results to your company.

An often-overlooked result of wellness programs is the positive impact on employee morale. Employees feel valued when employers show concern for the well-being of their employees. Wellness programs are more successful when the benefits are relevant and meaningful to employees.

- **Be consistent**

Implement worksite policies and environmental changes that support healthy living. For example, check out and revamp the offerings in the company's vending machine. There are healthy alternatives to the 3:00 PM chocolate bar. Consider sponsoring group weight loss programs in the workplace or exercise classes and walking clubs.

Finally, remember it is okay to have some fun along the way. Employee engagement and behavior change will be the result with the right combination of incentives and information.

BeneCom Associates offers the full range of employee benefit communications -- wellness programs, brochures, electronic media, newsletters, payroll stuffers, posters, summary plan descriptions, open enrollment materials, recruitment, orientation guides and much more.

To learn more, call us at **860.674.2626** or visit our website at www.benecomassociates.com