

EVERYDAY WELLNESS IS THE ORDER OF THE DAY AT SWISS COLONY



SUCCESS STORIES

The pedometer rivals the wristwatch when it comes to essential equipment worn by hundreds of employees of Swiss Colony, where wellness is well on its way to becoming an everyday habit.

Based in Monroe, Swiss Colony is one of the nation's largest direct marketers. Its family of catalogs also includes Seventh Avenue, Midnight Velvet, Ginny's, Through the Country Door, ASHRO and more. Products range from cheese and specialty foods to apparel, jewelry and home furnishings.

Swiss Colony employs about 1,200 full-time workers as well as 6,000 temporary associates annually in 12 cities throughout Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois and Missouri. While these employees may work from many locations in varied roles, they all have the opportunity to follow the same route on their journey to wellness.

Tying Activities to Risks

Swiss Colony has been offering on-site health risk assessments (HRAs) to employees since 1999, according to Tracy Meier, assistant manager, benefits. That was also the year that Meier began coordinating the company's "Wellness Works" activities, which gradually became her primary responsibility.

Swiss Colony's HRAs are conducted by Healics, a Milwaukee-based vendor. Healics coordinates Swiss Colony's test dates at each location. The vendor also provides Swiss Colony with detailed group reports that help focus employee wellness efforts based on the highest health risk factors.

In early 2003, Monroe Clinic applied for a grant in a unique program offered by The Alliance. The grant enabled Monroe Clinic to work with Swiss Colony to develop a pilot program to bridge worksite wellness screenings and cardiovascular risk reduction. The first 50 participants scoring 70 points or less on their HRA were offered an opportunity to enroll in the voluntary, confidential pilot program to reduce their cardiovascular risk.

The year-long program consisted of an initial consultation, an action plan designed to reduce risk factors, lipid panels, three quarterly follow-up sessions with a cardiac rehabilitation nurse and another HRA at year-end to measure progress.

"The program helped show that with a small amount of medical intervention, employee health risks would decrease," Meier said.

Swiss Colony's Wellness Tips

- > Start small and build on your program. Offering HRAs on-site at a cost of roughly \$50 to \$60 per participant is an excellent first step.
- > Gain support from the top to help everyone see wellness programs as an investment.
- > Take advantage of free or low-cost resources through The Alliance or health care vendors.
- > Ask health care providers or non-profit organizations to conduct "lunch 'n learn" sessions for employees.
- > Post educational materials in areas where employees can read them during breaks. Refresh the materials each month.
- > Create a wellness logo to market the wellness or benefit programs to employees.
- > Network with other businesses by participating in roundtable sessions through The Alliance.
- > Join the Wisconsin Wellness Council to receive access to wellness materials and educational seminars.
- > Make it fun and rewarding for the employees!

Offering Healthy Return\$

The success of the pilot program helped Swiss Colony justify investing in its Healthy Return\$ program, which offers a cash incentive to employees who participate in HRAs and wellness activities. Participating employees must agree to attend a preventive health visit with their primary care physician to review the HRA report.

To date, Meier says HRAs have proven to be the most meaningful wellness activity offered by the company. As participants repeat the assessments, their scores generally improve, rising from an average of just under 69 in the first year to more than 73 by the time they complete their seventh HRA.

"The group HRA reports provide a year-to-year comparison on how the average health risks are changing," Meier says. "This helps us focus our programs and educational sessions toward reducing the health risks that affect the majority. When we see an improvement in the overall HRA score, we know that we are making an impact."

In 2007, Swiss Colony launched a disease management program, which targets health plan participants with hypertension, diabetes, asthma and related conditions. The program combines patient education with telephone support to help plan participants improve self-management of chronic illnesses.

Swiss Colony also reimburses employees for participating in a variety of fitness activities. For example, Swiss Colony pays the cost of a YMCA membership for employees who complete at least 100 workouts within a year. Employees who pursue fitness activities on their own can track their efforts through the Winners Circle Club to receive gift certificates for company merchandise.

Creating a Wellness "Road Map"

Swiss Colony maintains a fresh approach to wellness by using short-term "themed" activities. A "Biggest Loser" contest challenged employees to lose at least 5% of their body weight within an eight-week period. The 347 employees who participated lost a combined total of 2,672 pounds, with the winner dropping nearly one-fifth (19.4%) of his body weight.

The 2007 celebration of Wellness Works Week kicked off a "007 Mission Possible" challenge. Participants built wellness activities into their daily routine to earn "frequent mover miles" that help them travel on undercover missions to cities with names that resemble well-known U.S. sites, including Las Veggies, Aerobiquerque, and Cholesterol Springs. Taking the virtual journey allows employees to combine education about each "city" with clues that help them demystify wellness.

"The primary goal of these themed programs has been to promote the corporate wellness culture in a fun and nonthreatening way," Meier says. "They seem to help reach that population that normally would not participate in wellness events. Breaking down some barriers for this population can lead to additional interest in long-term programs like fitness memberships."

Building Participation

Meier notes that Wellness Works started small and grew to become a comprehensive health and fitness program. Today, almost 75% of regular employees participate in voluntary HRA screenings. Participation in the fitness reimbursement program has tripled over the past five years.

Swiss Colony continues to create opportunities for health education, such as an employee fair that offers health and fitness information. At its first fair in 2005, Robert Sweetgall of Creative Walking challenged employees with his story of walking across America seven times. The company then gave each employee a pedometer and a walking journal to guide them on a "Road Map to Wellness" journey to all 12 Swiss Colony sites over the following year. A total of 520 employees averaged 5,000 steps daily to complete the trip.

"Today, we continue to have almost 400 of our employees wearing a pedometer on a daily basis," Meier said. "Many employees have told me it is like a watch; it bothers them when they forget to put it on in the morning."

For these employees, pursuing wellness is no longer a side trip. Instead, it's an ongoing journey toward better health, proving that "Wellness Works" at Swiss Colony.

The Swiss Colony

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