

Health Promotion Practitioner

Practical solutions for health enhancement programming

The Power of Carrots

We're not referring to some supernatural sight strengthener, but rather the enormous potential of incentives to pull people along toward a goal. And we're reminded of it often in our online programs at Health Enhancement Systems. For example, a longtime client has implemented 3 different 60-day online programs in successive years with these incentive values and completion rates:

Year	Incentive Value	Percent
2002	\$60	76%
2003	\$30	55%
2004	\$10	48%

At the same time, numerous clients offer nothing more than a \$7 t-shirt and average 45%-55% completion for the same programs, while those who offer no incentives have completion rates of 15%-25%.

There certainly are variables outside incentive value that influence participation and completion, but our experience shows that as little as \$7-\$10 invested in an incentive can double adherence in a 2-month campaign. Of the added participants, approximately half are folks who weren't practicing the behavior before the incentive program.

Dollars and Sense

If you attract 500 people to participate in a campaign that offers an incentive valued at \$10, and half (250) complete the program, you've spent \$2500

on incentives. Of the 250, around 50% were already practicing the behavior so you've had a positive effect on the other 125 people for about \$20 each.

Even if only 1 of the 125 makes a permanent change and avoids high blood pressure, obesity, high cholesterol, or a cardiovascular event, that single intervention has paid for itself many times over. (As an example, the American Heart Association estimates that a moderate, untreated hypertensive patient incurs over \$5000 in medical expenses annually.)

Is Money the Best Motivator?

Probably not. Here's why:

- Money gets spent on bills, fast food, gas, and other consumables. Once it's gone, there's no visible reminder of the accomplishment.
- Over time, cash incentives are viewed as part of normal compensation. The first year it's a novelty, a chance for a few extra dollars. But then there's not a lot of motivation to do more, and the money is expected.
- Once in place, systems are hard to change without upsetting those who liked them in the past — there's nothing more demotivating than money out of your pocket. So if the program isn't working, you have to up the ante to get them to buy in.
- It's difficult to recognize or celebrate the awarding of money tastefully and without making some people feel slighted.

Continued

Why Carrots Work

People like goals... and they like the positive reinforcement an incentive provides when they achieve the goal. It's that simple. Though there are probably hundreds of ways to implement an incentive program,

here's the bottom line: It should motivate participants to engage in the behavior long enough to experience the health or quality of life benefit for themselves — and continue practicing the behavior long after receiving the incentive. 🍷



Dean Witherspoon is President of Health Enhancement Systems, a leader in behavior change innovation serving organizations in North America and throughout the world. With 20+ years experience, Dean has served on the Board of the Association for Worksite Health Promotion, spoken at more than 70 conferences, and published hundreds of articles. Before founding Health Enhancement Systems he held health promotion management positions with Kimberly-Clark Corporation, Presbyterian Hospital of Dallas, and The Dow Chemical Company. You can reach Dean at deanw@hesonline.com.