

Health Promotion Practitioner

Practical solutions for health enhancement programming

Is Making a Big Splash Good for Your Wellness Program?

One of our most feared phrases when consulting with clients is “the employees loved it.” The “it” often turns out to be a short-term, unsustainable activity that produced a lot of smiles but had little long-term effect on health or behavior. That’s why we don’t favor big splashes for 1-time activities unless they’re tied to a maintainable program or used as a marketing technique to steer people into more meaningful interventions. That doesn’t mean you abandon promotions tied to National Employee Health & Fitness Day, as an example, but you use the event to pull people into a longer-term program.

Unfortunately, short-term success encourages many to create similar events, and their success results in more positive reinforcement. The program soon becomes a series of uncoordinated activities that aren’t necessarily tied to a core purpose. And health promotion program staff develop a reputation as balloon people — they know how to throw a good party, but they’re not integral to the organization.

Conversely, some groups have a clear understanding of their purpose but abandon related services because of low initial response. Often the poor turnout was due to weak advertising, conflicting events, or skepticism over a new service. Slight changes in promotion or delivery probably would have achieved the objective. And just hanging in there long enough to establish a base can lead to a sustainable program.

Are You Doing the Right Thing?

It’s impossible to say your programming is exactly as it

should be, but here are some tell-tale signs you’re getting off track:

- You believe total participation is the first thing to look at as a measure of success. What good is a 2-month exercise incentive program filled with people who exercise anyway? Reinforcement of active lifestyles is a good goal, but a better goal is to attract less active people.
- You fail to evaluate behavior or attitude change resulting from your services. Instead you focus on what participants liked or disliked. It may help you attract more people next time, but if it’s not ultimately affecting health, what have you accomplished?
- Quarterly and annual reports highlight number of participants instead of participant profiles. Your overall participation rate is a healthy 30%, but how many of those participants are already healthy?
- You don’t track the number of new participants and their demographics. As in business, attracting new customers and knowing where they came from are vital to continued growth and program viability.
- You develop “pilotitis.” You test everything on a pilot group before rolling it out to everyone. While this is a good practice to help tweak programs, it’s sometimes used to accept or reject a service without working to make it successful.
- Personal success stories are few and far between. Unsolicited notes, calls, and thank-yous aren’t

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statistically significant, but they indicate you're on track. If you go months without them, it may be time to reevaluate your approach.

- You don't try to benchmark 1-2 services or programs against a best-of-practice organization every year. It's possible you're the best at everything all the time,

but not likely. Make an effort to learn from others' successes and failures.

Resist the temptation to concentrate on numbers only. Focus on your core purpose, branching out to develop priorities and strategy. In time, the numbers will come — and they'll represent participation that's truly meaningful. 📊



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