

Health Promotion Practitioner

Practical solutions for health enhancement programming

What a Recession Means for Your Health Promotion Program

The uneasiness that accompanies the “R” word can drag on your wellness program, limiting overall participation and contributing to a feeling of going nowhere. To help you identify it and take steps to get things going again, here are 3 signs of struggle along with potential fixes.

New Participants Are Scarce

If you continue to see the same faces without an infusion of fresh blood, you’re living on borrowed time. New participants are vital to a dynamic health promotion program. Some ideas:

- *First Fridays.* Devote the first Friday of every month to first-time participants. Make personal invitations — notes, calls, emails, etc. Ask current participants to supply potential participant names. Host a no-obligation reception over the noon hour where you overview programs and services, collect information, and introduce instructors, counselors, etc. Review the data you collect immediately, and send an invitation on Monday to a service that matches their interest.
- *2-fer Tuesday.* Host a once-a-month (or once-a-week) service where both can participate for the price of 1 — as long as 1 participant is a first-timer. Fitness classes, cooking demonstrations, lunch ‘n learns, or any service you typically charge for is a good 2-fer Tuesday option.

- *Survey follow-up.* “Have you ever participated in an ABC wellness program?” If the answer is “no,” or “yes, but not in the last year,” there’s a ready-made target. The fact they completed the survey indicates they’re at least interested enough to respond, and if they’ve participated in the past, there may be a simple way to get them on board again.

- *Bounty hunters.* Offer your current participants half off a program or membership if they bring in a new participant. It works; try it.

The Numbers Are Down

It’s easy to rationalize... “people are busier,” “there’s less time for wellness,” “employees are stretched due to downsizing,” “our budget has been cut.” While any of these may be true, it doesn’t change the fact that your job, still, is to improve health behavior of the population. Here’s what you can do:

- *Know what’s really going on.* Avoid the temptation to just accept rationalization. Do a comprehensive survey, walk around and talk to people. You may confirm what you already suspect, but you could discover something new, like the perception your services have become stale.
- *Change what you can.* If people really are busier than they were a few years ago, you probably can’t change that. But you can adjust your offerings to more

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bite-size, on-the-go, take-it-home options to fit the current culture. The point is, once you know — specifically — what the problem is, you can do something to make it work. There are always options.

- *Get radical.* Seek the advice of the most creative people you know (preferably outside the wellness field), after explaining your challenge. Not the nitty-gritty, day-to-day stuff, but the overall mission of your program — improving health behavior of the population. Ask how they would go about it. And don't respond with "That won't work because...; I learned otherwise in graduate school; I tried it before and it didn't work; my boss will never go for it..." Give creativity a chance.

You Spend Most of Your Time Playing "Whack the Rodent"

That's the arcade game where the rodent pops up sporadically from different holes and you attempt to bonk it over the head before it retreats. You're jumping from one problem, challenge, opportunity, to the next — without making significant progress on any front. Some things to try:

- *Find out what's really important to management.* You have to ask; guessing is gambling. Do they want your

service to boost morale, reduce risk, save money, help with retention, all of the above? Don't stop at your boss; they may not know any better than you do. Once you know, you can ignore the jumpy rodents and focus on what matters.

- *Limit the breadth of your services.* This may go against your belief that more is better. That's not necessarily so, especially if you aren't excelling at what matters. Car companies periodically eliminate a model and even an entire line if it's a distraction from where they make their money.

- *Get help.* I know what you're saying... "I can't get help! That's why I play whack the rodent all day." Maybe you can get some temporary help by shifting budgets around. A college intern? High school co-op? Borrowing help from another department? If you demonstrate you can get more important work done over time, you may be able to add the help permanently.

Waiting for things to get better is usually a mistake. You could wait yourself right out of a job. Instead of seeing the economic slow-down as a drag on your wellness program, view it as an opportunity — position yourself for success in bad times and good. 🇺🇸



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