

B.C. Hydro's Extreme Health Makeover



Source: *By Sheryl Smolkin*

With health care costs continuing to rise, organizations have a significant financial interest in getting employees to adopt healthier lifestyles. B.C. Hydro's Extreme Health Makeover campaigns, modeled on the reality TV show *The Biggest Loser*, are a great illustration of how companies can effectively energize their workforce and give employees the tools and support system to make sustainable lifestyle behaviour changes.

How the B.C. Hydro Program Began

When it first rolled out the program in 2009, B.C. Hydro was already on virtually every best employers list in the country, including Canada's Top 100 Companies and B.C.'s Top Employers.

So it's not surprising that the company had a solid health education program and supported a network of volunteer health and wellness ambassadors who help to arrange local health screening clinics and facilitate sports and other activity programs.

But the Extreme Health Makeover which ran in 2009, 2010 and 2011 really kicked it up a notch. The goal of the program was to drive at risk employees to fill out health risk assessment tools and promote their sustainable lifestyle behaviour change.

The Program Design

All employees were encouraged to complete an online health risk assessment and tell a story why they should be selected as one of the eight contestants. Individuals selected were people from different regions of the province with diverse jobs who had a high degree of change readiness.

In the first year, the focus was primarily on the contest, and 400 of the 6,000 employees completed a health risk assessment. In the second year, a 30-day challenge was added that all employees could participate in. The challenge gave individual employees an opportunity to both track their nutrition and physical activities online and get behind the contestants. Over 650 people in 40 teams took part.

Each of the eight contestants received the services of a personal trainer, dietician and coach over a 12-week period. The company also ran live meeting sessions with these experts answering employee questions, and typically about 400 people were logged into each event using video conference technology.

By 2011, company executives who championed the program were added. They “walked the talk” by explaining and publically committing to their personal goals. Manager of Health & Recovery Services, Corrinna Hill, who spearheaded the Extreme Health Makeover program says, “The launch where some of the executive champions spoke was very well attended. Their participation also had a powerful impact on the number of user hits on the contest website.”

Employee Results

Results of the 2011 contest highlight the tremendous accomplishments of the 8 contestants. Collectively they lost 202.7 pounds and 119.25 inches over a 3- month period. The winner of the contest Tyrone Arndt (a line truck operator from Prince George) lost over 19% of his body weight which amounted to 49.2 pounds and 23 inches.

All contestants started with an unhealthy body mass index and had at least one additional risk factor for chronic disease (e.g. high cholesterol levels, blood pressure or blood glucose levels).

By the end of the 12-week challenge, the finalists lost between 7% and 19% of their body weight; between 6 and 23 inches; improved their blood glucose levels; and improved their total cholesterol levels to a healthy range. Most importantly, all contestants say that they have adopted a regular exercise program and a healthy nutrition plan.

In the 2011 Extreme Health Makeover resources and online tools were also available to all employees so that the broader employee population could work along-side the Contest Finalists and achieve their own personal health goals. The Take Action Tool Kit, the Ask the Experts webpage and Live Meetings on fitness and nutrition were also popular additions to the third year of the event.

With employees accessing these resources and following the stories of contest finalists and runners-up, the Extreme Health Makeover web pages continued to be among the highest ranked pages on the company intranet through the duration of the challenge.

B.C. Hydro's ROI

How much did the program cost?

Hill says it's difficult to quantify because different departments and cost centres contributed to the overall project as well as services provided by external vendors that support other overlapping facets of their health and wellness program.

The overall benefits of health and wellness programs like this one are targeting at risk employees and promoting sustainable health behaviours. By improving employee health, the company can also realize benefits such as reduced absenteeism and a reduction in drug or benefit costs.

The ROI was tracked based on improvements in overall company biometrics, although this doesn't translate to a dollar value. Success of the program was also measured by looking at web hits, additional extra-curricular activities organized by health and wellness reps and participation in featured live expert sessions.

From a broader perspective, each year after the program ended the company solicited ongoing feedback from the health and wellness reps and they also contributed input from their local work teams.

In addition to tracking weight, blood pressure, cholesterol and blood glucose,

contestants were asked qualitative questions about changes in their own behaviour, knowledge and attitude and whether they could sustain those changes.

“Recently we checked in with all of our past participants looking for sustained change, and for the most part everyone is leading a healthier life style including exercising and making healthier food choices,” Hill says. “Every contestant defined him or herself as a winner, based on the impact of the resulting changes on their life.”

Next steps

Due to organizational changes, decision has not yet been made as to whether the program will be run again. But Hill believes that the critical element that made the program a perennial favourite is the commitment of the participants and their willingness to take risks, share their numbers and their stories with colleagues. “That is what inspires the whole dialogue about health across the organization.”

Her advice to other employers considering a similar campaign is, “Develop or use an internal network, get a group of champions and have them help you test the concept and method of delivery. That way you open the lines of communication at an early stage and have ambassadors who will help you to get out an effective, consistent message to their team members.”

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