

SUCCESS STORIES

Wellness

Candy company helps workers cut calories

Employees eager to participate in classes focused on strength, flexibility, stress management and nutrition

BY KATHLEEN KOSTER

EMPLOYEES OF THE AMERICAN LICORICE Company are not only proud to celebrate nearly 100 years of making Red Vines and other yummy treats; they also relish the company-sponsored wellness programming.

ALC started its wellness initiative in 2007 and has held an annual "Biggest Loser" challenge in each of its three U.S. locations. Both manufacturing centers and the corporate office conducted "unique challenges, which we've worked through with our wellness program," says Tammie Mitchell, ALC's senior human resources manager.

Employees, many of whom have worked with the company for decades, actively participate in the weight-loss challenges each year. Nearly half of employees at the Union City, Calif., location joined in a 2010 challenge, a 50% increase over the prior year. That year, 71% of program participants shed a collective total of 356 pounds.

The 10- to 12-week program spurs employees to challenge themselves and their teammates with weekly weigh-ins. Mitchell and her team have carved out private areas for wellness and weigh-ins so employees feel comfortable. ALC's third-party vendor, Health Advocate, safeguards all personal information to

ease workers' fears that their privacy would be violated.

To spur participation, employees can exchange points earned by attending classes or engaging with a Health Advocate coach at the ALC store.

The rewards are constantly changing, though they typically are related to health and exercise. Participants can also give their points to have ALC donate to a local food bank on their behalf.

At ALC's Bend, Ore., location, the "Biggest Loser" challenge goes on year-round.

"Based on the feedback and the focus groups, [Bend employees] wanted the next step," Mitchell says. At Bend, there still are monthly weigh-ins, with added weekly classes like yoga and boot camp. There also is a greater personal accountability component to the program at the Bend location, where participants choose two of four areas to improve: strength, flexibility, stress management or nutrition.

The Bend office posts 75% to 80% participation in the weekly classes, driven by employees' enthusiasm to meet and interact with co-workers in a nonwork environment.

"I feel a sense of accountability to my co-workers now. The workout group is sort of like a team now," says ALC brand manager and wellness participant Mercedes Davidson. "We all feel comfortable throwing

ALC employees participating in a wellness class.

out a little peer pressure to give each other that little push we might need to make it to class on a day when we may not really be feeling it or mention how someone was missed in class. I really miss not going to classes with my co-workers when I travel. I make sure I work out when I'm on the road, but it's not the same. It's like team building three to four times a week."

"We coupled that with one-to-one coaching with a registered dietitian or a personal fitness trainer," Mitchell adds, noting that her team is looking to expand the program to the other locations.

'You get out what you put in'

ALC also organizes an annual walking program where associates pick a walking destination. The company adds challenges to their wellness programs throughout the year "to get associates to think differently about how to add more steps into their daily routine," says Mitchell.

The company also replaced its candy vending machines with healthy food offerings, like fresh salads and sandwiches for workers who don't have time to pack a healthy lunch.

"Developing these programs is labor intensive, but you get out of them what you put into them," Mitchell af-

irms, adding that "initially, it was me pushing the program." However, as more employees started participating, "very quickly it became the associates asking for changes [and giving ideas] for programs," she notes. ALC has added massage therapists and healthy cooking classes to the wellness slate — all based on employee feedback. "It's become very much associate-driven; it's their program and for them," she says.

Davidson agrees: "I feel like the program is what it is because the coordinators have been incorporating feedback from the very beginning and have truly built the programs for us."

Standing up, moving forward

The latest strides in wellness at ALC have focused on ergonomics of the workstation. Close to 75% of employees have moved to standing workstations, says Mitchell, and many others use stability balls. Mitchell is looking into treadmill standing desks as well.

She believes employees need movement throughout day, not just a single hour-long program during the day. "We need to think beyond programs and initiatives, and think about how we live 24 hours a day," she says. ■