



DRIVERS FOR WELLNESS PROGRAM PARTICIPATION: A CASE STUDY



Executive Summary

We provided an annual wellness program for a client from 2012 through 2016 called The Not One Ounce Challenge. The point of this program was to promote healthy behaviors as employees headed into the fall and holiday months. Participation was supported through marketing collateral updated each year. This collateral included new themes for each month, along with monthly and weekly coaching for each site. In addition to wellness education, two forms of incentives were applied: for those who completed the program, and for a monthly random selection of 10 persons. In each case, they were asked to weigh in simply to show that they had not gained weight. Over this five year period, the number of program participants has held remarkably firm. The minor variations can be attributed to periodic changes in the rules regarding "starting weights." This paper demonstrates the importance of regular wellness communication, in combination with an incentive approach to sustaining wellness participation and outcomes.

Methods

Design:

This is a retrospective study looking at data from a weight management program called Not One Ounce, run from 2012 through 2016 for the North American population. Each cycle of this initiative involved an initial weight for each participant, followed by a weigh out afterwards. The initial weight was reset every other year. In other words, if employees weighed in for year X, the weigh in for the subsequent year (X+1) was their lowest recorded weight from year X.

The Not One Ounce time period included the final months of the calendar year.

Sample:

The Not One Ounce program was provided for US employees. The total number of eligible employees was approximately 12,000 with only slight annual variations.

Measures:

For participation, we report on the number of those who weigh in at the beginning of the program along with the number who weighed out at the end.

For outcomes, of those who weighed out, we report on the number who gained weight, the number who lost, and the number who sustained their weight. In addition, a monthly weigh in was conducted for 10 employees selected at random. If the employee had not gained weight they were provided with an incentive prize of \$100. The number who were at or below their initial weigh in value was recorded.

Participation was supported by an incentive structure which remained the same through the five year period. This included cash payments provided under one of two conditions.

1. If the employee completed the program by weighing out, and simply did not gain weight they were awarded a cash incentive (commonly, \$50).
2. Ten employees were randomly selected each month. The employee would be invited to weigh in. If they had not gained weight, they were awarded \$100.

The variation was that every other year employees were not able to use a “weigh in” to start the program, instead they used their lowest weight from the prior year. We then compared the participation and outcomes values, year over year, to assess the impact of this changing incentive structure.

Intervention:

The Not One Ounce program is an end of year education initiative with four components: activity, nutrition, weight, and mindfulness. Each year, a unique theme is selected for the overall program and coaching is provided for each week of each month. As an example, if September were dedicated to activity, each week would include new coaching for becoming more active. If October were dedicated to nutrition, each week would include new coaching for healthier choices, etc.

Coaching delivery is in the form of electronic and physical posters, placed in break rooms, cafeterias, on cc TVs, “wellness walls,” within plexiglass tabletop displays. This content (monthly theme and weekly coaching) was provided by Mediterranean Wellness to wellness coordinators of each site location. Content was then deployed by wellness coordinators in the manner deemed most impactful.



The marketing collateral above is representative of the educational campaign approach. Each included a theme (Mission Cruise Control with a space theme, The Challenge Express with an itinerary theme, etc.).

Analysis:

The participation numbers were tracked annually, with initial registrants compared to those who completed the program, to assess adherence. Year over year changes in participation numbers were tracked to assess the percent change from the prior year.

Outcomes within these populations were tracked by comparing the number of those who gained, maintained, or lost weight through the year. Annual variations in outcomes were tracked by comparing these values year over year.

Results

Program participation remained strong over the 5 year period. Fluxuations in participation occurred in a predictable manner, tightly linked to the rules for establishing the initial weight value. When participants were allowed to establish a new baseline weight at the beginning of the program, participation increased between 1.8% and 9%. By contrast, when participants were required to use their previous year's lowest weight as their new baseline weight, participation slipped between 3% and 6%.

Program completion was measured as the percentage of the starting population who weighed out. This value increased from the initial year (52%) to 66%, 68%, 72%, and 65%.

Those who completed the program and lost weight increased from 43% to 59%, 52%, 61%, 55%.

Those who completed the program and maintained weight remained virtually unchanged over the 5 year period, varying from 15% to 13%, 13%, 16%, and 15%.

Those who completed the program and gained weight decreased over the 5 year window, from 42% to 28%, 35%, 23%, and 30%.

Table 1. This table shows the participation and outcomes data for 2012 – 2016.

Not One Ounce 5 Year Summary

| | 2012 WT CARRIED OVER | % | 2013 NEW STARTING WT | % | 2014 WT CARRIED OVER | % | 2015 NEW STARTING WT | % | 2016 WT CARRIED OVER | % |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------|-------------------------------|------|-------------------------------|------|-------------------------------|------|-------------------------------|------|
| PARTICIPANTS (WEIGH-IN): | 3745 | (N/A) | 3811 | 2% ↑ | 3584 | 6% ↓ | 3944 | 9% ↑ | 3829 | 3% ↓ |
| COMPLETED (WEIGH-OUT) | 1965 | 52% | 2524 | 66% | 2440 | 68% | 2846 | 72% | 2469 | 65% |
| LOST WT | 837 | 43% | 1479 | 59% | 2440 | 52% | 1738 | 61% | 1353 | 55% |
| GAINED WT: | 830 | 42% | 710 | 28% | 853 | 35% | 657 | 23% | 747 | 30% |
| MAINTAINED: | 298 | 15% | 335 | 13% | 323 | 13% | 451 | 16% | 368 | 15% |

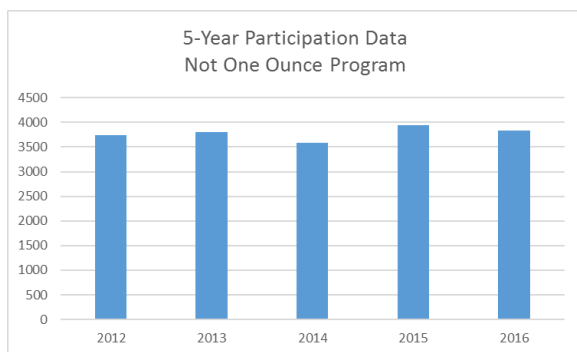


Figure 1.

Number of participants annually from 2012 – 2016. The population is relatively stable with the exception of the bi-annual variation, correlating to the rules change in initial weight

values.

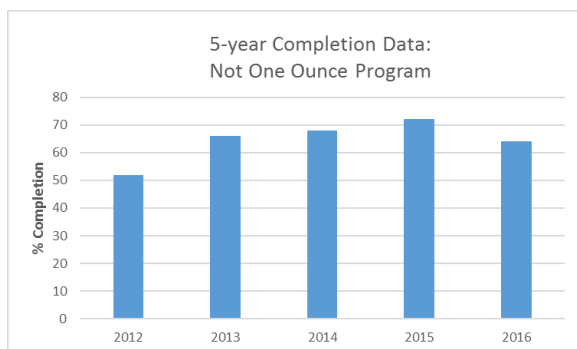


Figure 2.

Program completion annually, measured as a percentage of those who began the program. This value increased over time, with minor fluctuations

aligning with the changes in weigh in rules.

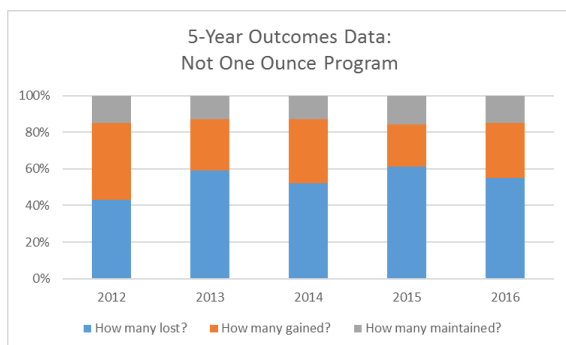


Figure 3.

Outcomes data annually, showing those who lost weight through the program (in blue), those who gained weight (in orange), and those who maintained (in gray).

Discussion

As a retrospective study, we initially had not planned to review these data after 5 years to analyze trends. However, following extended demand for the program, it became clear that a review of the data would be instructive. By reviewing the program, we can correlate the strong successes which can inform later efforts to increase participation and improve outcomes.

The Role of Wellness Education:

Each year a new overall theme was developed by our creative team (see examples above). Each monthly theme included weekly coaching as well (for fitness, nutrition, stress, or weight). Instructions to wellness administrators was to place the content on wellness walls, in cafeterias, in break rooms, and on the internal CC-TVs each week.

Research showing the impact of steady positive messaging on the participation and outcomes of a corporate wellness program is sparse. However, it is known that consistent visible marketing can create brand awareness, which can increase appeal and use.

In that sense, the messaging component of this program has likely played a vital role in establishing program acceptance and maintaining awareness.

Wellness Education: Moving Forward

It is clear from conversations with site wellness leaders at the many locations that the visibility of the marketing messaging was inconsistent. Placement varied from site to site, including the following: within glass wellness boards, taped onto the pillars of public areas, in plexiglass sheaths on cafeteria tables, taped on walls in break rooms, on CC TVs in the cafeteria.

Program metrics would improve if the awareness were increased. This might be improved by providing a “best practices” guide to site leaders for deploying the messages.

Another improvement could be to add brief announcements to employee meetings. These announcements could be no longer

than 2 minutes, but would supplement existing outreach. As a verbal reminder, this would cause the program to reach far more employees than through passive posters alone.

Finally, while many people do not interact with a computer, the vast majority do interact with cell phones. Creating apps for the delivery, direct to their personal device, would represent the most targeted approach. Moreover, this gives the opportunity to deliver media of any type: text, audio, video.

Incentive Structures:

The incentives were provided in two ways: one year-end award for those who did not gain weight, and monthly awards for 10 employees chosen at random.

Incentive payments provide a significant motivation to participate. However, for the program to have meaningful impact, it would need to last over a series of months. Programs lasting three to four months are difficult to sustain if there is only a single incentive at the end. Our solution to this dilemma was to have a random monthly selection of 10 individuals. They were invited to weigh in and, if they simply had not gained weight, they would win one hundred dollars.

The fact that anyone could win “the happy hundred” at any time throughout the program provided sustained motivation for employees. And the lottery-like nature of this structure also allowed us to leverage a relatively small incentive amount into a larger effect.

Incentive Structures: Carry-over weights

In order to discourage weight cycling, in which participants might control weight for the duration of the program, and then gain weight just before the start of the next year’s program in order to “game the system” in their favor, we instituted a policy. This policy consisted of making participants weigh in for one year. For the next year, the lowest weight from the prior year was used as their starting weight.

As one might imagine, this proved unpopular with some employees. This rule change seemed to influence participation and outcomes in a predictable way. When it was a year to carry weights over from the prior year, participation numbers were down slightly, but down nonetheless.

In addition, during the carry-over years participants were less successful at maintaining or losing weight than during non-carry-over years. The reason for this trend is that some who may have gained a couple of pounds from the prior year will continue with the program anyway in order to try to get back to their prior year's weight. On average, this represents a slight uphill climb for the population and is reflected in the change in outcomes.

Incentive Structures: Moving Forward

Employees seem to be happy with the annual incentives attached to the program, and have registered no complaints at all. However, one issue with the incentives is that the monthly incentives could be better publicized so that more employees were aware of them. Marketing the incentive benefit could increase participation as well as outcomes.

Managing the cost of the monthly incentive payment could be mitigated by encouraging the sites to offer their own incentive payment. For example, if a site of 300 lives provided this incentive, each month someone will win, and this will be a person that the employees know. This increases visibility, enthusiasm, and will sustain participation.

Conclusions

As stated in the most recent Wellness Council meeting, the Not One Ounce program is the most recognizable wellness program. It has established its program brand and, as such, is something employees look and ask for each year. Once established, this kind of brand recognition becomes a valuable wellness asset that can be leveraged to create further participation and positive outcomes.

Although the steady participation rates indicate a sustained brand awareness, this inertia must be sustained through consistent messaging delivered in a consistent manner.

In addition to wellness education messaging, our creative incentive structure also played a large part in the development of the ongoing success. The combination of an end-program prize (to provide a distinct goal) with the monthly randomized awards (to sustain attention through the process) was ideal for leveraging the greatest outcome without requiring the greatest expenditure.

Like participation, outcomes varied predictably with the bi-annual rule changes for starting weights. When participants were allowed to re-establish their baseline weight, the number increased. When the new baseline weight had to be the lower of the past two weigh-in values (the start and end of the prior program), outcomes declined: those who lost and maintained weight decreased slightly, those who gained increased slightly.

This result is an artifact of the fact that the population must carry over their prior year's weight value. Participants continue on the program because they feel that they can overcome any deficit from the prior year. Some number of these do not, which increases the number of those who do not lose or sustain weight.

We are mindful of the importance to sustaining the brand, while at the same time changing elements to make it more attractive. These changes will include new pre-program marketing materials, incentives, and monthly educational content.

A strong improvement in the incentive structure could be made by doing two things:

- Address the dilution problem
- Brand the incentive itself

If three thousand people do this program across 25 sites in North America, 10 winners among that population would not make much of an impact. In other words, the incentive structure has a dilution problem. However, if we encourage individual sites to provide the interim monthly payment, the 10 winners would be chosen among perhaps 100 – 200 persons. This creates a higher likelihood that they will win, that others will see them win, and that outcomes will improve.

The second element to this is to brand the incentive itself. Currently we refer to the one hundred dollar payment as “the happy hundred,” but it has not been couched as such to the population. We recommend creating a sustained marketing initiative well prior to the start of the program around the monthly incentive payment.

This marketing campaign would include pre-program content, videos, and announcements. After each monthly winner, announcements of the winners at their sites will reinforce the message for subsequent months. This visibility before during and after the monthly incentive will create an awareness that will drive employee participation and improve outcomes.

We have amazing momentum with a program that has evolved over the past 5 years. Since the beginning, we have settled on a methodology that is producing sustained positive results. The goal now is two-fold: continue to reinforce the aspects that are working, and find ways to further increase participation and improve outcomes. We remain excited about the possibilities.