

The Talking Snack Machine

Leave it to YouTube. How else could I have ever seen a video of the “magical” French-fry making vending machine from Belgium. (Don’t believe me? Make sure your boss isn’t looking, then check it out here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6Te8JIsYoQ> .)

While I haven’t run across one of these French-fry-making wonders here in Iowa, if I ever do, odds are I’m buying some fresh fries.

After seeing the aforementioned video, I took a trip to my local office vending area to browse the selections. I was pleased to find that some healthy selections were available. And by some, I mean two: Snack mix and light buttered microwave popcorn. The remainder of the machine was chock full of high fructose corn syrup and partially hydrogenated soybean oil. Yummy.

Disclaimer: I will never judge you for making an unhealthy vending machine choice. For a spell in 2011, I kept our vending machine pretty much devoid of Zingers.

So now I’m thinking. If the vending machine didn’t have Zingers, would I buy anything? Maybe, or maybe not. It all hinges on a couple of key factors worth considering if you’re thinking about offering healthier vending items at work:

1. **Price is king** – No, I don’t sell used cars on the side. I’m just saying that if it costs more to buy healthy items, I never will. It’s just simple economics.

The fix? Subsidize the healthy food items in your vending machines to ensure they are as financially appealing as any junk food that remains. Think of it as an investment in your health plan. Any dollars you put toward healthy food may have a very positive overall impact on claims, productivity, and general well-being – all factors that are improved by employee wellness.

2. **Taste is key** – There’s a reason so many vending machines are filled with greasy chips and sugary cookies: They taste absolutely awesome. Why else would we knowingly fill our bodies with some of the ingredients listed on those packages? I’ve got an English degree, but even Hooked on Phonics can’t help me pronounce “tertiary butylhydroquinone”. But somehow this mystery ingredient makes snacks taste spectacular.

The fix? Plan your vending machine options as carefully as your daughter’s wedding menu. This takes time, effort, and time. Suppliers have been expanding healthy options for ten years, so the variety is there. But you need to know your employees and what they will (and will never) purchase. If you’ve made it cheap enough, half the battle is won. Now make sure they actually want to eat it. Many suppliers provide employee surveys to help you identify your company’s particular likes and dislikes in regard to healthy options. Overall, some of

the most popular healthy vending items are yogurts, nuts, protein bars, and fruit juices. Check out the “Resources” below for a sample vending survey.

We all know that healthier food options lead to healthier food choices. Perhaps you’ve considered swapping out those morning meeting donuts with some fresh fruit. That same idea can be applied to your vending machines with even more potential impact on the wellness culture of your business. How you stock your vending machines speaks volumes to your employees. So what are your vending machines telling your employees?

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Resources:

Healthy Vending in the Workplace: An Employer Toolkit

<http://www.marc.org/community/pdf/HealthyVendingResourceGuide.pdf>

Missouri State Employee Vending Machine Survey

<http://www.iowahealth.org/filesimages/Services/Occupational%20Health/Newsletter/MOVendingSurveySept2013.pdf>

Read the full State of Missouri report here:

<http://health.mo.gov/living/healthcondiseases/obesity/pdf/HealthyVendingCampaignReport.pdf>

