

“Employees spend a good deal of their day at work, so why not use this as an opportunity to educate them and offer helpful ways to stay healthy and active?”

— Deborah Thwaites,
American Express Canada



« STRATEGY »

THE ROAD TO WELLVILLE

How American Express Canada is working to create a culture of health

By Craig Sebastiano / Photography by Jaime Hogge

American Express (Amex) Canada wants to make health and wellness part of the employee culture, both at work and outside of the company.

Its program goes by the internal brand Healthy Living and operates under three core pillars: energy (nutritional health), strength (physical health) and vitality (mental health and well-being).

The program was launched in the U.S. in 2009 by its parent company and came to Canada one year later. There was a wellness program before then, but the company decided to alter its approach.

Healthy Living has become part of the company's culture to improve the health of its employees, explains Deborah Thwaites, director of compensation and benefits with American Express Canada, in Markham, Ont.

Launch of the new brand included a large marketing event featuring fitness demonstration classes, volleyball and

basketball activities, and a smoking cessation booth. All employees were given a passport and got a stamp for each activity they participated in. The stamps determined which prize level they'd be eligible for at the end of the event.

There was also a campaign to encourage employees to walk 10,000 steps per day. The company gave each employee a pedometer and mapped out a path within its headquarters. "If employees followed the path from beginning to end, they would have walked 10,000 steps," she says.

The launch also included rebranding the on-site gym and wellness centre under the Healthy Living banner. The wellness centre offered free hand and neck massages by its on-site registered massage therapist; the gym raffled off prizes, including free yoga mats.

The cafeteria and healthy meal options were also branded with the new name. The cafeteria offers a salad bar, smoothies, fruits and veggies. There's also a full-service omelette and yogurt bar in the morning.

Getting the Message Out

The company uses various communication channels to bring employees up to speed on what's being offered. They include a blog, a digital employee newsletter and internal plasma screens to advertise the different resources and events related to the program.

Amex Canada also hosts an annual event to reinforce its internal program called the Healthy Living Expo, which had exhibits from more than 25 vendors in 2014. On-site games and prizes were offered, and healthy sandwiches were distributed to all employees in attendance.

As part of the event, the company tracked a variety of metrics. Nearly 90% of workers attended the event last year. Of those, 96% visited three or more vendors, and 97% said the expo inspired them to take a more active approach to their own personal well-being. "A lot of it is awareness and changing behaviours and attitudes," says Thwaites.

The company uses many different tactics to get employees to attend the

expo, such as plasma screens, the blog and an all-employee calendar invite to ensure employees make time for the event.

Getting Physical

Fitness initiatives are key to changing employee behaviours. The company encourages various sports activities. There's a basketball tournament with more than 60 participants, a company volleyball tournament with six teams from various departments and a beginners running club (the company doesn't want to discourage employees from participating if they're not at an advanced level).

There's also an on-site gym, which costs about \$20 a month and has an annual member appreciation week to attract new members. People who tele-commute receive a fitness reimbursement credit for any expense equivalent to what's offered at the centre, such as Zumba classes, as well as gym memberships.

Amex Canada also caters to different divisions of workers. It launched a four-week pilot program last year called Fit in 10 (10 minutes of exercise) aimed mainly at employees working in the call centre because they don't have the flexibility in their daily schedules to hit the gym. Instead, employees take fitness breaks at their desks.

Employees use resistance tubes to work out various areas of their bodies either while seated or standing up. Each worker gets an instruction manual on how to properly use the tubes. The fitness centre also meets with employees periodically to demonstrate exercises and to provide coaching and support.

"It was developed in partnership with our on-site gym partner to encourage our call centre employees to be active while at their desks," Thwaites explains.

Metrics show it's working: last year, 82% of participants reported a significant improvement in their flexibility, confidence level and sleep patterns. And 83% reported moderate to significant improvement in their energy levels and upper body strength, as well reduction in stress levels. Based on these successes, the company's now rolling out the program to all of its on-site customer service reps.

In 2014, 36 Amex Canada employees also participated in a global fitness challenge, in which they competed against peers at Amex offices around the world.

Workers had to record the number of squats, push-ups and ab repetitions they did over a four-week period. The Canadian team came in third globally, and the top Canadian female participant was also No. 1 in the world.

Putting It All Together

While some health and wellness initiatives are connected with other Amex offices globally—like the global fitness challenge—the Canadian team also creates programs and communications around holidays and health-related awareness days, weeks and months.

Last year, Amex Canada took part in two mental health-related events. For Mental Health Week, it had a weeklong blog campaign to highlight various resources for support, such as information on a new digital mental health portal offered through its employee assistance program (EAP) provider. There was an on-site Canadian Mental Health Association booth offering support, informational pamphlets and tea bags with five tips on the back for how to improve mental health and deal with stress. An EAP representative was also on-site and spoke to more than 180 employees.

And there was a global American Express campaign for World Mental Health Day to heighten awareness and reduce the stigma associated with mental illness. Each market, including Canada, launched its own campaign, with the goal of heightening awareness and reducing the stigma of mental health.

Later this year, the company will relocate its head office to Toronto. The new building will have a fitness centre featuring a salt-water pool, tennis courts, an indoor track and a healthy cafeteria bar. The new facility will allow Amex Canada to expand and customize its fitness class offerings while allowing them to make more informed meal choices, Thwaites says.

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Q&A

DEBORAH THWAITES
ON THE IMPORTANCE OF WELLNESS

How does the program in Canada differ from other countries?

The Healthy Living brand exists globally, but the execution of the program is adapted to each market based on the employee demographics and business needs of any given country.

What does the future hold for the program?

We plan on continuing to enhance our Healthy Living by constantly looking for exciting and innovative ways to engage our employees. We will also be expanding our wellness centre offerings to include an on-site nurse primary care centre, preventive medicine, well-being promotion and disease management.

Why are health and wellness programs important?

We think it's important if employees come to work feeling good about themselves and the healthy lifestyle choices they make. That helps to optimize their time at work and drives employee engagement.

What kind of employee feedback have you received?

The feedback in general has been that [employees] like the variety of programs we offer. And also, the education around healthy lifestyles and how this is helping them make healthy lifestyle choices while they're at work and outside the organization.

What lessons did you learn?

The need to constantly find innovative and exciting ways to engage employees through education, and provide a variety of activities and programs that offers something for everyone.