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Working to be Ship Shape

Unishippers multi-unit franchisee Wanda Sieber is used to moving freight. Now she's investing real money in getting her employees to move-10,000 steps a day.

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Balls aren't just for exercise anymore. Sitting on “desk chairs “ are, (l-to-r) Stephanie Reindl, Wanda Sieber, Kasey Faulkner and Don Yeager.

Matthew Karas had a full agenda the day his employer gave him a 10-pound bag of sugar to carry around, so he asked coworkers to use packing tape to attach it to his body, allowing him to have his hands free. Tracy Bliese diapered her brown-paper-covered sugar bag and gave it a baby face; Michael Schroeder, the office's network administrator, fashioned his into an oversize Intel chip. Carrying around an extra 10-pounds for a day was the introduction to the 13-week wellness program multi-unit franchisees Wanda and Bill Sieber launched this summer for their Unishippers Green Bay office in Wisconsin.

TV shows like “The Biggest Loser” depict people with dramatic weight losses along the lines of 60 to 100 pounds, CEO Wanda Truttmann Sieber says, but she wanted employees to understand just how significant even a 10-pound weight loss could be.

“We're tremendously overweight,” she says of the country. “It's hard to navigate America and not be

hit by this epidemic.”

Because she had no human resources department to turn to, Sieber started scanning the Internet and asking friends to send her ideas on how to put together a wellness program for her 20 full-time employees and five part-timers.

“This isn’t about fitting into your jeans anymore. This is about keeping your employees alive,” she says. Thinking of ways to help employees avoid the doctor’s office is gaining momentum, not just with large corporations, but also with small businesses. “We’re seeing more employers implementing wellness programs,” says Babette Apland, senior vice president of HealthPartners in Minnesota at a recent program on healthcare franchising. But in order for a company to embrace wellness as a business strategy, Apland says the “top people have to show that it’s a priority.”

Members of The Wall Street Journal’s 2011 CEO Council listed workplace wellness programs to be one of their top priorities. The consensus was that healthier employees are more productive employees.

It’s hard to determine exactly what the actual ROI on wellness programs is, according to Human Resources Executive online. Studies tend to be flawed, or show savings in projected numbers, not actual savings. For instance, annual healthcare costs for obese employees are, on average, \$1,723 higher than for healthy-weight employees. But, according to the site, that’s a projection, not an actual cost.

But that doesn’t dissuade the Siebers from putting the time, effort and dollars into their employees’ wellness. “Healthier people are generally happier and better workers,” Bill Sieber says. “It’s a small investment to make for a workplace (where) people look forward to coming to work.”

In her research, Wanda Sieber says the one phrase she heard over and over by people who had lost weight and taken charge of their health was: “I’m so much happier.” “That was the clincher,” Sieber says.

The Siebers, who have three territories for Unishippers—Green Bay; Seattle, Washington; and Mobile, Alabama—also took into account how being fit has helped the two of them deal with the stresses of an economic downturn, as well as taking on additional territories at a time when the system lost its largest carrier.

Wanda Sieber admits she’s working on losing 10 pounds just like some of her employees. Bill Sieber got into serious weight lifting when he turned 40 and got down to 185 pounds. It wasn’t a mid-life crisis; it was pragmatic. “Wanda’s 10 years my junior,” he says. “I have this desire to stay healthy.”

The business owners are not just offering guidelines; they’re offering tangible incentives. Employees who successfully complete the five-step, 13-week wellness program will earn a significant chunk of change—\$600.



Wanda and Bill Sieber want to take the stress out of being the middleman in shipping freight for customers. Some employee perks include office-grown fresh tomatoes.

Gaining momentum

Sieber calls herself the “dreamer-upper,” while her husband is charged with backing up her plans with data. “I’m probably his worst data nightmare,” she says, grinning. “Numbers tell stories that are just as interesting as if someone’s reading you a story.”

It’s too early in the program to see any impact on their insurance rates or productivity, but Sieber does receive feedback from employees on how much they like the program. She’s been careful, she adds, to set realistic goals. “I don’t want to set anyone up for failure,” she says.

Individual competition is all well and good, but she doesn’t want departments to start competing with each other. Although they post the results, they don’t give out specific numbers. That’s enough incentive for Kris Rudd, who came in second for number of steps recorded during the first period. Her goal: “I want to beat Wanda,” she says. But super-competitive sales rep Matthew Karas wants the actual numbers recorded so he’ll know the record he has to beat.

Competitiveness seems to be a systemwide attribute, because corporate ran a separate challenge for headquarters’ employees. Half the team signed up to have their fat-to-muscle ratio read, and then entered a six-month challenge to see who could lose the largest percentage of body fat, according to Joe Curtis, vice president of sales for Unishippers corporate.

Everyone “threw \$20 in the pot” and there was a lot of trash-talking and updating going on, Curtis says. It was fun, but it also created long-lasting, healthy changes in the employees’ diets and exercise programs.

To ensure their employees also succeed at their challenge, the Siebers made changes to the workplace.

The business recently relocated to a renovated, old-brick building with a built-in incentive for exercise. There’s no elevator, so everyone has to climb up a steep flight of stairs every time they arrive or leave. It’s also located near walking and biking trails, which employees are encouraged to use for commuting to work.

Employees have both ergonomic chairs and exercise balls to sit on in front of their two monitors. Five hours on a stability ball can burn up to 260 calories a day, plus strengthen your core and improve your posture, Sieber says. There are currently five stability balls. “The balls are up for grabs,” Adam Angell in accounting says. However, leave your desk for a few minutes and the ball’s “been stolen,” he adds. “We did have more balls, but the cats got to them,” Sieber says.

That’s right—the cats. Sieber’s research revealed that having animals around was cathartic. The large orange and black-and-white cats have become a source of friendly, but fierce, competition around the office with everyone trying to woo the felines to hang out in their cubicles. Treats, kitty nests and the like sprung up, but as cat owners know, cats are fickle and independent. One thing to consider is allergies, but Sieber says only two people are allergic to the cats and they were forewarned before they were hired.



None of this is a mandate, Sieber stresses: “We’re not controlling, it’s just options.”

There are also bird feeders outside and occasionally Sieber brings in bags of corn and sends employees down to the river to feed the geese. Large pots on the deck are planted with tomatoes, edible flowers and herbs for the picking.

Nature and art contribute to feeling happy, she contends. To that end, the spacious office condo has large windows overlooking Main Street with no blinds so natural light streams in. The walls are plaster and exposed bricks, while the old wooden floors are uneven, but charming. Art from around the world decorate the walls and a large mirror framed in stained glass hangs above the tall stairway for one last reflection before you head out.

The mirror, unfortunately, is warped so that when you check yourself out in it, you look short and wide. Sieber laughs as she admits more than one employee asked if that was a ruse to get them to participate in the wellness program. It wasn’t.

Since increasing the number of steps employees take each day is one of the goals of the program, the Siebers subsidized the cost of pedometers for staff participating in the program (all but two employees opted in). Sieber wanted a pedometer that automatically resets at midnight and would download to a computer so employees would have reliable data to track. The company subsidized \$13 of the \$30 cost. “I wanted them to have some skin in the game,” she explains. A couple of the employees bought pedometers for their spouses as well.

Bouncing on the exercise balls increases the number of steps (although a purist contended only actual steps should count), as does cordless headsets. The headsets allow employees to walk around or stretch while taking calls, Sieber says. Straps hang on the back of her office door if anyone wants to do resistance training while calling customers or vendors.

One idea she considered but rejected because of the cost was installing a full kitchen, so she could offer a free, healthy lunch. “It had to be a commercial kitchen,” she said, so instead they stock healthy food every week—fruit, carrot sticks, peanut butter and jelly, whole-wheat bread, low-calorie soups and popcorn.

“I tell them their vending machine is the dollar store down the street,” she says.

They’re in the process of constructing an exercise room in the basement, which now serves as the nap room where employees can go to take a short power nap. “I’m a big proponent of sleep,” Sieber says. Employees are also encouraged to walk on their lunch break, bike to work and work out at the YMCA, a

Commit to be fit

Here’s the breakdown on the 13-week challenge:

Level One: To participate, each employee must purchase the tracking pedometer and average 6,000 steps per day for the first week of the challenge; and increase by 1,000 steps a day for four weeks, until they reach 10,000 steps per day for the remainder of the challenge (nine additional weeks). If this is achieved for 10 of the 13 weeks, receive \$200 and become eligible for Level 2 reward.

Level Two: Have a normal BMI (body-mass index). If BMI or body fat is above the goal, lose an average of 1 pound per week during the 13 week challenge (or get to goal). If this is achieved, receive \$100 and become eligible for Level 3.

Level Three: Have a smoke-free blood panel. If this is achieved, receive \$100 and become eligible for Level 4 reward.

Level Four: With a combination of diet, exercise and/or meds, have a healthy blood pressure rating for two of the last three weeks of the 13-week challenge. If this is achieved, receive \$100 and become eligible for Level 5 reward.

Level Five: Participate in a community athletic event (a 5K or greater) during the challenge. If this is completed, receive \$100.

Total: \$600

membership the company partially subsidizes. To make it easy for employees to exercise on the way to work, a shower was added to one of the restrooms.

Cheri Falk, director of accounting, uses the shower regularly. “I joined Curves last October,” she says, and the closest location was between home and work. She’s able workout more frequently, because she doesn’t have to double back home to get dressed. “Exercise has become a part of my life,” she says. By July, when the wellness program started, she had already lost 17 pounds. The \$600 she stands to win in the challenge is already slated for a trip to visit her parents in Florida. Other staff members have their eye on an iPad, power tools, paying off school loans or buying Christmas gifts with cash this year.

Cori Karpinen, a single mom, knew she needed to stop smoking, lose weight and reduce her stress level, but didn’t make it a priority—until the contest came along. It’s the kick in the pants she needed to finally give up smoking. “I don’t smoke a lot, but I’ve done it for so long, she says. “My son’s learning at school how bad smoking is.” And she wants to be a good role model. She used to drive through fast-food places to save time. Now that’s changed. When she tells her son she’ll cook dinner, he still asks for Burger King. She merely replies, “I don’t cook Burger King.”

“At the park it was easy to sit and text,” she says. “Now I get up and walk around or push him on the swings.”

So does any work get done?

The Siebers practice the old maxim “Hire slowly, fire quickly.” They hire self-starters, with integrity. And because of this, Sieber says, they can trust staff not to take advantage of the wellness perks. Salespeople have quotas to meet, and staff members stay late or come in early to make up for any time spent exercising during the day. And because the office also does logistics for other franchisees in the system, there is plenty to keep employees sitting on their exercise balls. As Karas points out: Salespeople can’t afford to goof off, “we’re paid on commission.”

While Wanda Sieber spends significant time on her project, she does have help. Jessica Ackamn, who was hired as a customer service rep has a degree in wellness and helped design the program from the ground up.

Shipping “freight is stressful,” says Betsy Sieber, one of the owners’ six children, who works at the office summers when not attending Brigham Young University. As the middleman between the business shipping freight and the carrier, Unishippers has to save the customer money in order to make money.

“The hardest thing to get people to realize is that we can get them lower prices by adding another person to the mix,” Sieber says.

Unishippers’ value, besides bringing carriers pre-screened customers, is that they eliminate “ugly freight”—items outside the norm, such as boxes not on a pallet, fragile things or irregularly shaped items. In other words, they educate the customer on how items should be packaged for shipping. Adding to that stress—at least for the owners—is that Unishippers guarantees the carrier is paid at the time of shipping, not when the customer pays Unishippers’ invoice.

Since sales for all three territories are handled at the Green Bay location, the majority of the staff is in one place. Which makes wellness a daily conversation.



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—Wanda Truttman Sieber

“The money’s a nice incentive, but just feeling better is the pay off,” says Don Yeager. “I’m older, so for me that’s reward enough.” But yes, he’ll gladly accept the \$600 if he earns it.

All companies may not consider wellness programs the cat’s meow, but no one can argue the Siebers have crafted an office where people love to come to work— which considering those people will live longer lives is a good thing.