

# Revamp the vending machine

*Give employees healthier choices at work*

**BY CONNIE ROETHEL,**  
*for SBT*

**H**ow often have you found yourself standing hungry in front of the vending machines at work, shuddering at the sight of a sealed-up sandwich or other food-like snack, wishing you had gotten up 15 minutes earlier to pack a lunch?

You ponder, "I need food, but is it worth the empty, nutrient-poor calories?" Whether you are working long hours, second- or third-shift, you may be among the many Americans who subsist on vending machines for your snacks and meals.

It's the one place many employees frequent when they've forgotten to eat breakfast or need a quick "pick me up" in the afternoon. It's also where most items have higher sugar, higher calorie and "bad fat" content.

Poor nutrition has become a concern for companies looking for opportunities to reduce health care costs by helping employees live healthier. Cholesterol, weight and body fat data obtained through employer-sponsored health risk appraisals reveal the sad nutritional status of most employees.

Poor diet contributes to a variety of workplace health issues, ranging from obesity, heart disease and diabetes to decreased productivity and

increased work injury, poor nutrition is costing companies millions. And yet work site vending machines, which many employees depend upon for their snacks and meals at work, are typically the worst source for healthy food choices.

## Healthier vending fare

The typical vending machine selection consists of soda, chocolate bars, potato chips and pre-packaged high-fat, high-salt entrees. However, there is hope that employees may soon be able to find more nutritious food and drink selections. The combined emphasis on health in the workplace and the rise in obesity among school-age children is having an economic impact on the food and vending industries.

Prompted partially by the threat of removal of vending machines from schools as well as businesses, the industries are responding. The National Automatic Merchandising Association (NAMA), which represents the \$30 billion food and refreshment vending industry, is initiating a "Balance for Life" campaign to promote how vending in schools and businesses can be a part of the solution to reduce obesity.

In tandem, their suppliers in the food

industry are creating healthier vending products. Alternative selections include more water, yogurt drinks, melon and berry fruit cups, granola bars and reduced-fat turkey wraps.

NAMA also has released a nutritional rating system which sticks a colored label next to chips, trail mix, candy bars, cookies and crackers in vending machines. Each color scores the product on its nutritional worth.

CL Swanson, a 61-year-old, Madison-based vending service provider, has responded similarly. Through its "Better for You" program, Swanson provides vending machines with healthy choice products. Jeff Parks, president of Swanson, calls the decision to focus on healthier products "A Catch-22."

Parks said, "Industry data supports the fact that people are moving toward healthier drinks, but the trend is not yet evident in snack foods. The biggest change in sales is seen in the consumption of water, diet and non-carbonated beverages in

place of soda."

Parks added, "When employers completely eliminate choice, for example by removing all soda, employees respond with anger and negativity. Companies who are most successful in making the change provide support financially by discounting healthier choices. Equally important is that the message needs to be consistent. You can't eliminate soda and french fries, and then allow employees to smoke at work."

## Ask your vender for help

Molded Rubber and Plastics Corp. (MRPC), a CL Swanson client, is pleased with the vending supplier's response to its request for help. The Butler-based manufacturer of rubber and plastic components for the medical field looked at its vending machines as an opportunity to promote its message about wellness.

The MRPC health awareness team, which includes employees from different

## 'Better-For-You' vending options

If you frequent the vending machine at work, consider the following:

### Choose

Bottled Water  
Nutrition Bars  
Salads, wraps  
Decaf coffee, green tea  
Nuts, pretzels, baked chips

### Lose

Full-sugar soft drinks  
Candy Bars  
Pizza, burgers, hot dogs  
Coffee, hot chocolate  
Regular potato chips

departments in the company, realized that food choices in the vending machines contradicted what employees were learning in their monthly lunch n' learn nutrition classes.

With the help of their Swanson agent, the team reviewed current purchases as well as healthier options. A two-week trial period of healthier snack choices resulted in continued sales and no backlash from employees. This led to the addition of salads, healthier

sandwiches and other lower-fat, lower-sodium entrees.

Swanson provided monthly reports to track types and quantities of purchases, and the results remained positive.

"We were extremely surprised that in just a few short months, our employees are consuming less of the unhealthy foods and more of the healthier food products," said Chris Gerosa, MRPC's director of Human Resources. "This just shows that if you ask

for help and have a supportive vending service in place, change is possible."



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