

Missouri

Healthier Vending Machine Project

Public Health Problem

In Missouri, more than 20 percent of adults are obese, and more than half are overweight. Unhealthy food choices are a contributing factor. For adults who spend a majority of their waking hours at work, available food choices at the worksite influence their nutrition. Vending machines at worksites typically provide unhealthy food at relatively low prices and in convenient locations.

Intervention Example

The Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS) initiated a healthier vending project at their office buildings where approximately 800 state employees work. The purpose of the project was to explore the sustainability of the market for healthier items in the DHSS vending machines. DHSS marketed and supported the healthier foods for a limited time period to provide the vending operator the experience of providing healthier options without the risk of losing profit. DHSS offered to reimburse the vendor for the amount of the loss of monthly profit based on gross monthly sales for the previous year. In addition, DHSS provided promotion through a kick-off event, signage on the machines and throughout the buildings, and promotional email messages that included contests with prizes. The healthier vending items were determined by an employee survey of preferred items and based on the Missouri Eat Smart Guidelines.

Implications and Impact

Success of the project was assessed by: 1) comparison of volume of sales compared to the previous year's sales, 2) conducting a post-project employee survey, and 3) an interview with the vendor. An average increase in revenue during the project of \$224 per month was reported. DHSS did not need to subsidize the vendor since there was no loss of profit. The employees responded on the survey that they will continue to purchase the healthier vending choices. The vendor offered this statement at the post-interview, "(I) did better than originally expected in this location. In general there is a misconception that venders want to sell junk food, in reality we want to put in foods that will sell." Other state agencies have requested technical assistance to get the healthier vending project initiated in their worksite. State program staff have provided technical assistance to the state Capitol vending project which is offering healthier vending choices to employees, lawmakers and visitors to the Capitol. High level state management staff and lawmakers identified the need for healthier food options in the evenings, when the Capitol cafeteria is closed. The cafeteria manager, with the assistance of DHSS staff, marketed and supported the healthier foods for a limited time period. DHSS provided promotion through a kick-off event by the Department Director with taste-testing of some of the healthier items included in the vending machines, signage on the machines and throughout the Capitol building. DHSS offered to pay for the samples for taste-testing and to reimburse the cafeteria for loss of profit during the testing phase. In addition, a large poster explaining the different components of the food label was on display. The healthier vending items were determined by availability of products, items that sold well in the cafeteria and the Missouri Eat Smart Guidelines. Success of the program was based upon the earnings from the machine. The cafeteria manager reported a 25 percent increase in dollar sales; however, there was also an increase in the number of soda beverages sold, both diet and regular; flavored water was the best seller. Although dollar sales went up, overall sales for the same period were down by over 40 percent. During a post-pilot meeting, the cafeteria manager provided three suggestions for future vending projects.