

January 2010

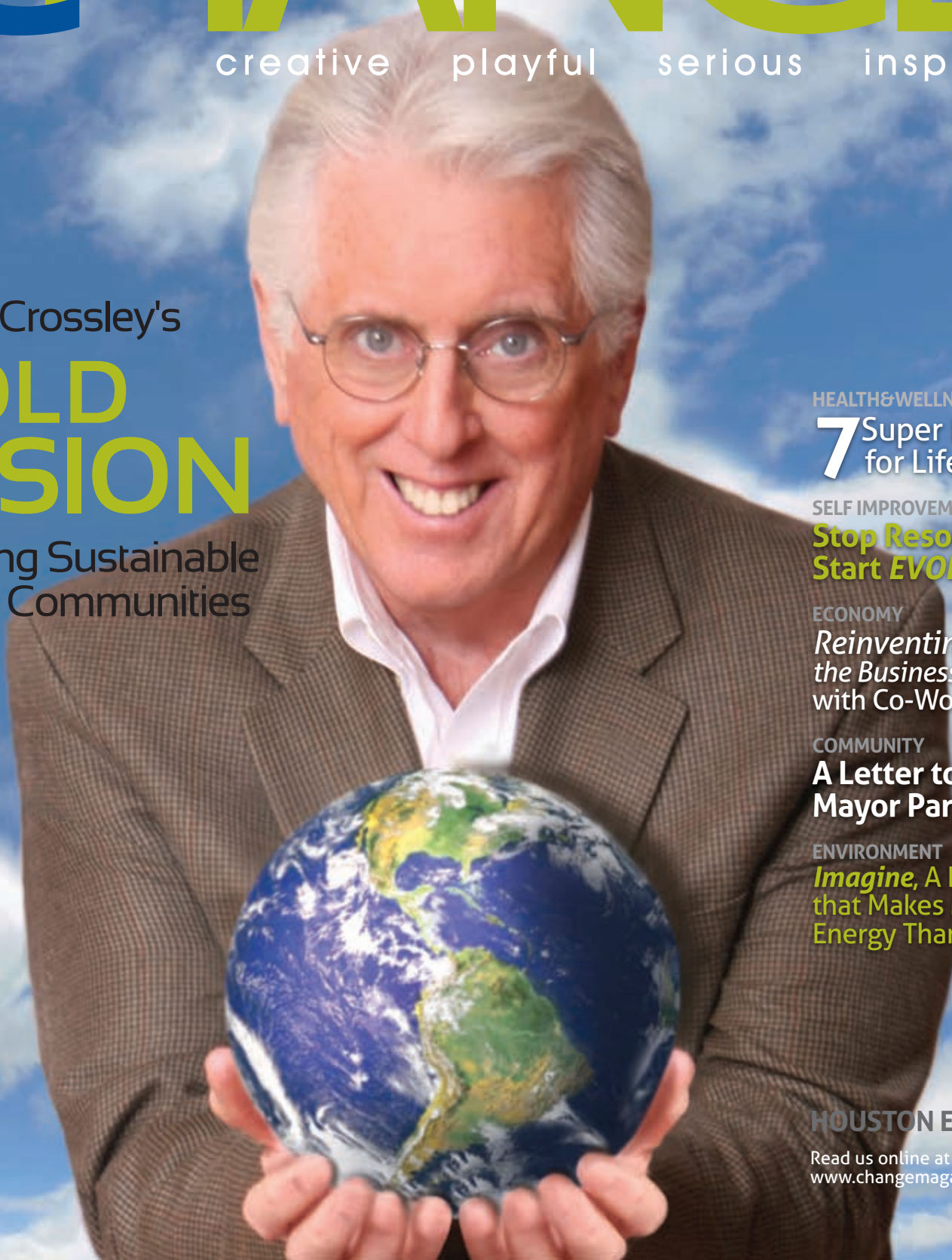
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Employee + Health

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Companies Are Only as Healthy as Their Employees

By Carol Lapin, MS, RD, LD, CSSD

In today's economy, budget cuts are the norm. However, the cliché "you've got to spend money to make money" makes "cents" when it comes to employee wellness programs. Faced with health care expenses rising more than six percent a year, corporate wellness initiatives are a sound investment.

Health care costs for obese/overweight adults are 36 to 39 percent higher than for a person of normal weight, resulting in approximately \$90 billion spent on health-related problems annu-

ally. Diet influences almost every known disease in one way or another. Diseases directly tied to obesity include type 2 diabetes, coronary artery disease, stroke, hypertension, cancer, asthma, osteoarthritis, gallbladder and liver disease and sleep apnea. Morbid obesity, indicated by a BMI (body mass index) over 40, is regarded as a disease in its own right.



Threats to the preservation of corporate wellness programs in Houston are not new; however, the obesity epidemic today makes their survival more critical than in the past. According to Texas Comptroller Susan Combs, The Lone Star State's business community spent an estimated \$3.3 billion in medical costs associated with obesity in 2005. At

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the current pace, obesity could cost businesses \$15.8 billion annually by 2025.

During Houston's fabled economic boom of the 1970s and early 1980s, the city experienced tremendous growth in population, employment and income. In 1981 the population grew 7.2 percent, employment rose 8.4 percent, and personal income shot up 19.9 percent. Out of the oil profits rose one of the first corporate wellness centers in the country, The Sid W. Richardson Institute for Preventive Medicine, which was a dream of Dr. Antonio M. Gotto, chairman of the Department of Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine at the time.

In the 1980s, I met Registered Dietitian Molly Gee, who oversaw the nutrition program at this state-of-the-art facility. Gee recounts the success of The Institute, saying, "For a 10-year stretch we were highly sought after to incorporate wellness programs into some of Houston's biggest companies, such as law firms Vinson & Elkins and Butler & Binion." The programs created then are still relevant today, including health screenings and evaluations, stress management, smoking cessation, stress testing, cardiac rehabilitation, weight management and fitness classes.

When OPEC lost its power to set oil prices in the early 1980s, Houston, once considered recession-proof, saw joblessness skyrocket. By 1986 Houston's unemployment rate had climbed to 10.2 percent, and 100,000 jobs disappeared. Corporate wellness programs were abandoned, and The Sid W. Richardson Institute for Preventive Medicine shut its doors.

"Since we were pioneers in corporate wellness, we really didn't have the data to prove that wellness programs helped the company's bottom line," says Gee. Now, some 30 years later, research shows that programs similar to

those at Sid W. Richardson save companies both money and lives.

Studies indicate that employers who invest in worksite health promotion programs see a return of three to six dollars for every dollar invested over a one- to five-year period. A review of 42 research articles on the benefits of worksite wellness programs revealed a 28 percent reduction in sick leave absenteeism, a 26 percent fall in use of health care benefits and a 30 percent drop in workers' compensation and disability claims.



While some employees today are enthusiastic about wellness programs, many are sitting on the sidelines. Almost 60 percent of workers surveyed by the American Heart Association in March 2009 said the economy has affected their ability and desire to take care of their health. It is simply not a priority. So, how do you motivate employees to participate?

To boost buy-in, companies are offering perks that include everything from gift certificates to discounts on their insurance premiums. *USA Today* reports that a new study finds overweight employees paid to slim down were more successful than employees who were not.

Marathon Oil's Wellness Director, Mag Franzoni, can attest to the power of incentives for weight loss. She took me on a tour of Mara-



thon's impressive employee workout facility, complete with locker rooms and a fitness staff. Franzoni talked about their current weight loss challenge called The Biggest Winner. "We did it to help get weight off before the holidays and to get employees exercising," she says.

Marathon has 320 participants (93 teams) involved in the contest competing to see who can lose the most weight based on percentage of body weight loss. One successful team participant named Josh credits his weight loss of more than 30 pounds in eight weeks to being part of a team. Josh says, "The accountability, the weekly instruction with feedback for food logs and the fitness regimen made a big difference." He also noted that the incentives, including cash rewards, gift certificates and prime parking places, were inspiring.

Companies do not have to spend big on weight loss programs to see tangible results. Tere Batista, Chief Executive Officer of Employers One Source Group (EOSG) has 10 employees. She asked me to help them lose weight and get fit. These steps were implemented to achieve their fitness goals:

- Class met once a week during lunch for one hour for six weeks
- Weight recorded weekly. Body measurements taken on the first and last day of class
- Food records kept and reviewed throughout
- Weekly topics discussed ranged from dining out to the psychology of eating
- Weekend grocery shopping tour aimed at "buying healthy"
- Heart-healthy recipes provided and dishes brought in to sample
- Nutrition zones set up in the lunch room for healthy foods only
- Fruit, healthy sandwiches, whole grain crackers, and salad bars available during in-house lunches and for healthy snacking
- Fitness programs recommended and goals set
- Employees wore pedometers to encourage more walking and recorded progress
- Discounted follow-up visits offered

EOSG employees worked together as a team

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and reported weight loss of from five to 20 pounds, along with a commitment to exercise and healthy eating.

A bill before Congress could give a boost to current corporate wellness efforts and aid

in the development of new programs. If passed, companies would receive a 50 percent tax credit to implement comprehensive worksite wellness programs for employees.

With all this high-profile attention about obesity and health care, hopefully, companies will revamp their health plans by including and/or expanding corporate wellness programs. Businesses are finally realizing that their bottom line may only be as healthy as their employees. **C**



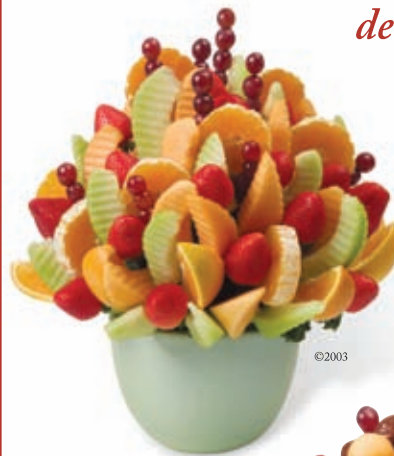
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carol Lapin is a Registered, Licensed Dietitian and owner of CSL Nutritional Services. A Certified Sports Specialist Dietitian in The American Dietetic Association (ADA), she is also certified by The American College of Sports Medicine to implement fitness programs and is a member of the ADA's Executive Board for Sports Cardiovascular and Wellness Nutrition. Lapin counsels individuals on nutrition and fitness and gives wellness presentations to companies and organizations. For information, log onto www.cslnutritionalservices.com.

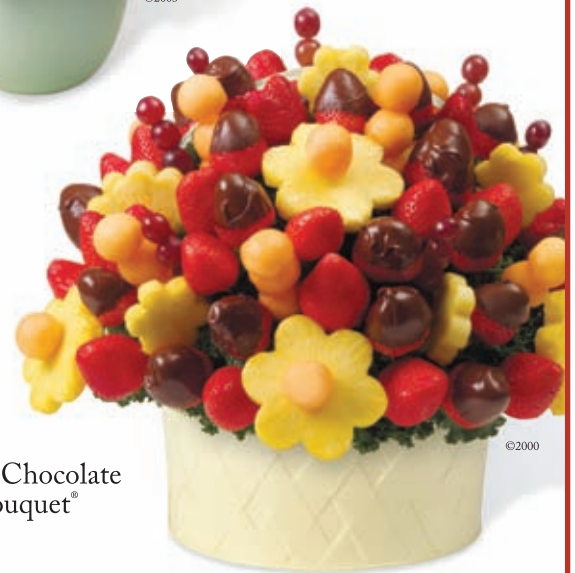
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