



Food For Thought

Socket Gets A Healthy Makeover

Less than a year ago, the break room at Socket, a Columbia-based telecommunications company, looked pretty average: a soda machine loomed in one corner and a junk food vending machine flanked the far wall. These days, the room sports a healthy makeover as employees can take their breaks amid a cooler full of alternative food choices and nutritious snacks.

The break room is just one step in the company's plan to promote corporate wellness.

Socket has added nutritionist Denise Coots to the staff, and she works to help employees make better decisions about their health.

"Corporate wellness is a booming field," she says. "It's so exciting to bring it to Columbia."

Her plan is three-pronged: counseling, education and action. Coots sets up individual interviews with employees willing to take advantage of the program and conducts a "diet history." The report gives employees a list of what is lacking or unhealthy in their typical diets. Coots and the employees work to form goals and ways to reach them.

Coots also promotes companywide education. Twice a month, Coots gives healthful presentations to the staff, ranging from topics about portion control to heart-healthy foods. She

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sends e-mail tips and suggestions to all Socket employees.

Coots was the driving force behind transforming the break room. She pushed the soda machine to the far end of the room and replaced it with a cooler filled with carrot sticks, string cheese, bottled water, apples and other healthy choices. Counters are strewn with alternative snacks, and each item is priced below retail. Payment is based on the honor system, with a jar in the break room to collect funds. Every week, Coots restocks the break room, and the food pays for itself.

“Seeing other options gets you thinking about everything you put in your mouth,” says accounting supervisor Sheila Lynch. “It’s a lot of work to be healthy.”

Lynch came to Coots when the program got rolling in December. The two had a consultation, and they came up with a lifestyle plan specific to Lynch’s needs, including increasing vegetable intake and eating a diet lower in carbohydrates. Coots follows up regularly with her participants, which keeps individuals accountable for their own well-being, Lynch says.

Lynch, who has Type 2 diabetes, says her first goal was weight-oriented, but now she’s aiming for other goals, like cooking more at home with her family and eating fewer meals at restaurants.

“I don’t expect to be skinny in the next year, just healthy,” she says.

Lynch has learned it’s the little things that help break bad eating habits. Now she reads all food labels and keeps track of her caloric intake with a food diary. Her biggest challenge is to get her husband and children to eat healthy. If she leads, they will eventually follow, she says.

Exercise, too, is an important part of the program. Socket has reached a deal with Anytime Fitness, and employees are encouraged to visit regularly.

“A lot of younger employees are forming their habits right now,” says Carson Coffman, Socket’s vice president for marketing and sales. “It’s going to stay with them long term.”

The corporate wellness program started as an idea that Coffman entertained more than two years ago. When Socket



moved into its new building on Clark Lane, the idea became a reality.

When the program first started, not all employees were ready to jump onboard, Coffman says. But more are catching on, and having a nutritionist helps focus energy on the program, he adds. Coffman also plans to extend the program to other arenas, including financial health.

“The program is selfish,” he says. “Socket will benefit from this. The better the employees feel, the better our customers will be treated.” ■

Photos By L.G. Patterson