

Programs use communities to drive engagement, power health improvement

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Healthways QuitNet®, a tobacco cessation program, attracts some 9,000 unique online visitors per day to its site, reaching more people at a lower cost than most phone-based quit lines and achieving comparable quit rates. Offered to more than three million eligible seniors, Healthways SilverSneakers® program regularly draws 43,000 people per day to participating U.S. fitness centers. Sixty percent of program participants had no prior fitness center membership. Both programs demonstrate innovative ways to drive individual participation through the power of communities.

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On the surface, Healthways QuitNet® and SilverSneakers® programs are distinctly different. QuitNet targets smokers and ex-smokers with online tools and features that members can use 24/7 to get and stay tobacco-free. SilverSneakers targets the Medicare-eligible population with onsite classes that increase physical activity, improve fitness and mental health, and prevent health problems that plague the elderly. Dig deeper, and both programs demonstrate the innovative use of member communities to power health improvement.

These programs offer insight into how communities can effectively enhance individual health. Keys to community impact include:

- A population size that makes interaction easy
- Common ground across the community—a health goal or set of issues
- Ways to learn more about other members
- Help making one-on-one connections that go beyond health improvement.

Critical mass with a common purpose

On a Monday morning in late August, some 1,200 smokers and ex-smokers were congregating online at the QuitNet® Web site. The Internet-based tobacco cessation program attracts more than 9,000 unique visitors on a daily basis. Alan S. Peters, Director of Online Counseling and Community Management for Healthways, estimates 30 to 40 percent of those people interact online with others.

Due to the effectiveness of social support, a year 2000 report by the U.S. Surgeon General recommended that it be part of any tobacco cessation program, both as part of treatment and outside of treatment.

“Because so many QuitNet members are online all the

time, people get real-time, almost instantaneous support when they need it most and can pick and choose who they connect with,” Peters explained.

Anyone can access the QuitNet site; those with premium memberships sponsored by employers, states, or health plans enjoy more customized features and counseling services. Even those who are passive visitors and who don’t post messages themselves will read message boards to boost morale.

Conservative estimates of QuitNet results indicate 15 to 20 percent of members remain tobacco-free six months after quit dates. Building on the social impact of the QuitNet online community, Healthways has expanded the program’s reach and effectiveness by augmenting the site with phone counseling and nicotine replacement therapy to provide a comprehensive smoking cessation solution.

A recent study on the QuitNet program, as reported in the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, showed that the online community engaged 1,776 employees across IBM’s workforce. Overall quit rates were 13%.

The study documented an association between member intensity of QuitNet use and quit rates. Successful quitters logged in to QuitNet more frequently, spent more total time online, viewed more pages, and were more involved in the QuitNet community—posting messages and using other member connection features.

Like QuitNet, SilverSneakers’ success is integrally related to its ability to offer a high level of social support.

On any given day, some 43,000 seniors complete a Healthways SilverSneakers® program class at participating U.S. fitness centers. On average 24 people attend each class, with an average participant age of 73.

Deborah Redder, Director of Instructor Development and Activity Programming, taught Muscular Strength and Range of Movement to a group of 50 on a recent Thursday morning at Metro V Athletic Club in Dublin, Ohio. The group included a 92-year-old woman, a mother/daughter pair ages 78 and 52, and a couple celebrating 60 years of marriage.

Launched in 1992 with the goal of improving the health status of older adults, SilverSneakers found itself filling an unmet social void for many people. Some 60 percent of

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members have no prior fitness center membership. (Center membership is free to those who enroll in SilverSneakers through a Medicare-eligible health plan offering the program.) Once in class, participants commonly meet neighbors they never knew they had.

"The survivors of this generation want to be around other survivors of this generation," Redder explained. "The biggest holiday of our calendar year is Veterans Day."

Community relations events, held in conjunction with health plans introducing SilverSneakers, have attracted up to 500 interested seniors. Three-fourths of participants surveyed in 2006 indicated that continued availability of SilverSneakers would impact their decisions to stay with their health plans.

High participation contributes to a strong community. Volunteers called Silver Stars help balance class sizes and schedules at SilverSneakers fitness center locations to accommodate the needs of participants.

Connections within the community

QuitNet began in 1995 when the Internet was still new. One message board, called QuitStop, served as the community forum.

"What we noticed pretty quickly is that people want to subdivide," Peters said.

QuitNet members can now find others with similar issues or interests via 11 member forums, two chat rooms, and hundreds of member-created clubs. In the Weighty Matters forum, quitters discuss concerns and issues related to weight gain. The Other Addictions forum serves as a gathering place for members in other programs, like Alcoholics Anonymous. A Spirituality and Quitting forum provides a place for religious expression, eliminating online arguments on QuitStop between believers and non-believers.

The QuitNet program also supports member connections through an email system, called Qmail, which allows members to send each other news, advice, or words of encouragement. Tens of thousands of Qmails are sent back and forth every day. A "buddy system" allows members to invite others they meet online to partner for longer-term support.

Like QuitNet, Silver Star volunteers with the SilverSneakers program facilitate community connections through an

introduction and peer support mentor program.

"They introduce themselves to anyone who is new...and are able to integrate [that person] in with a buddy," said Redder. "You hook these people up, and they strike up a conversation."

Volunteer phone trees promote continued involvement. "They are vigilant about taking care of each other," she said.

Class instructors also foster socialization, and classes regularly celebrate birthdays and other events. Annually, as part of a National Active Adult Achievement Week launched by the program in 2004, SilverSneakers members strive to set a record for the number exercising in one day. More than 60,000 members participated in 2007.

As older adults increasingly become Internet-savvy, SilverSneakers is enhancing online resources for information-sharing and social support.

Happily ever after

Redder guesses that connections made through SilverSneakers generate about one wedding a month. One recent marriage took place in the YMCA facility where the bride and groom first met. After the ceremony, the wedding party took their usual SilverSneakers class.

Peters reports that QuitNet connections have also blossomed beyond online tobacco cessation. "We have people getting married...falling in love...putting together marathons."

"Meet-ups" in major cities are commonplace—yet not essential to community impact. Many members share photos online, and the program is exploring member profile enhancements that would allow more personalization.

"Cognitive behavioral therapy happens when you interact with others like yourself," Peters said. "What we're finding is that the same kind of healing happens here online as happens in 3-D. What matters is that members show up, and they open up and connect with other members."

Whether face-to-face or online, community connections clearly have a role to play in powering individual health improvement. Healthways also incorporates the community model into its integrated health and wellness solutions and will continue to pursue innovative ways to unleash their full potential.