

Firmenich Finds Successful Recipe for Worksite Wellness with Help from The Heart of New Ulm Project

What's that smell wafting through the New Ulm air today? Is it the chocolate ingredient used in Tootsie Rolls? Perhaps a seasoning for a McDonald's or Burger King item?

For people who live or work in New Ulm, it's often a fun guessing game to speculate on the flavor of the day being manufactured at Firmenich's facility on Front Street. As part of the world's largest privately-owned company in the fragrance and flavor business, the New Ulm plant is a recognized leader in using spray dry and dry blend processes to create a vast array of tasty and aromatic flavor ingredients for their clients' food product recipes.

However, when it came to the ingredients for a successful employee wellness program for its roughly 100 employees in New Ulm, Firmenich leaders didn't quite know where to begin. They knew they weren't the experts — and didn't want to play their own guessing game. That's when they decided to turn to the many resources and expertise already available to them through the New Ulm community, particularly through Hearts Beat Back: The Heart of New Ulm Project (HONU) and New Ulm Medical Center Occupational Health Services.

"We were starting from scratch; we didn't have any goals, mission or structure," said Nicole (Nikki) Miller, a material procurement planner who stepped up to champion Firmenich's wellness efforts. "We recruited members for our wellness committee, but for a few months, we really sort of got stuck there; we didn't know which direction to go," she explained.

That all changed in May of 2016, when Miller attended a worksite wellness networking and training event coordinated by HONU's Worksite Wellness Action Team. It was there that she met Melissa Hoffman, a member of the Action Team who is a public health nurse coordinating efforts in Brown County for the Minnesota Statewide Health Improvement Partnership serving Brown, Le Sueur, Nicollet and Waseca Counties. After inviting Hoffman to meet with the wellness committee, Miller said Hoffman recommended that they brand themselves, set some goals and then use HONU resources as tools.



“ We all agree we don't know where we would be without The Heart of New Ulm as a resource. ”

— Nikki Miller, Firmenich Wellness Committee

"As soon as she gave us those tidbits in the middle of May of 2016, I feel like our efforts took off," said Miller. "And our management basically said, 'We're supportive.' They let us drive everything."

HONU Training and Networking Events to the Rescue

Miller and members of the Firmenich wellness committee started attending every quarterly HONU worksite wellness event, and soon discovered another helpful resource — New Ulm Medical Center's Occupational Health Services. When Jeff Allerson and Jennifer Maurer from that team came out for a consultation, the committee peppered them with questions on a wide variety of wellness topics. How many hours of sleep do employees ideally need? How can we help employees better adapt to rotating weekly shifts for our 24/7 operations? How can we implement healthier vending options and promote stretching?

(continued)

"That was a true blessing for them to come out and help us, because we had a lot of unknowns as to what we should do and where to go," said Miller. "They answered every single question for us and then we pieced that all together into developing activities, surveys, recipes and more."

HONU's worksite wellness events also provided a great opportunity for Firmenich representatives to network with worksite wellness leaders from other manufacturers in New Ulm, such as Parker Hannifin and Windings. "We asked them questions like, 'What did you implement? What did you struggle with? What's been successful for you?'" said Miller.

Miller said they soon realized a key ingredient they needed to include. "It's not just about eating healthy and diet and exercise; it's also about focusing on morale and a sense of community in our workplace. Combining these together are when things can really take off," she said.

A Wide Array of Wellness Activities and Initiatives

Things have taken off pretty quickly indeed for Firmenich's wellness efforts. In the span of less than two years, the company has embarked up an impressive list of activities and initiatives designed around seven different spokes: social, occupational, physical, mental, medical, financial and spiritual.

For example, they surveyed employees on healthier options they'd like to see in their vending machines and then worked with their existing vending contractor to make changes; water and Gatorade® are now offered free of charge. During Dental Hygiene Awareness Month, they gave away free electric toothbrushes to employees who went to the dentist. They've offered educational events in the breakroom where they show employees how to make smoothies with less-familiar ingredients such as coconut milk, spinach and kale.

They've added plants and greenery where possible, and even installed light therapy boxes in common areas. The boxes mimic natural sunlight and allow employees working in areas without windows, or during the night shift, to reap the health benefits that natural light promotes.

The six-member wellness committee communicates about activities and initiatives through a "wellness board" placed in a prominent location in the break room, which enables them to communicate with everyone in the plant and not just those who have email. Miller said another benefit is that the committee



“ ... you get that sense of community and that small-town feel, but there's so many opportunities for a healthy lifestyle. That's what I see with the Heart of New Ulm and why I was so passionate that we have the program here for Firmenich to benefit. ”

has representation from each department; in addition to Miller, members include Kelcey Andrews, Jamie Berg, Lydia Drexler, Doug Prochniak and Terry Rich. "This helps us get a lot of really good input into what is or isn't working for each department; everybody seems to be extremely honest."

Miller said one of the events they're most proud of is a 5K walk-run event they conducted both in the spring of 2017 and 2018 on the public walking and biking trail outside their facility that attracted 25 percent of their employees and also many family members. During two scheduled times, employees were encouraged to take a break and head out to the trail for a walk or run. Wellness committee members were stationed every half mile along the route for encouragement, and prizes were given to incentivize participation.

Some of the wellness committee's plans for Spring 2018 and later include a Pickleball event, another 5K walk-run event, and a multi-faceted challenge with components around each of the seven spokes where employees can earn points and prizes. They're also going to map both indoor and outdoor routes for walking meetings, and continue activities for employees to connect with the community, such as volunteering for Meals on Wheels, and going as a group to community fairs and other events.

Support from HONU Has Made the Difference

Although Miller said the company receives support from their health insurance carrier in the form of a smoking cessation program and a budget for wellness program prizes, "they're not as supportive as the Heart of New Ulm has been for us. We all agree we don't know where we would be without The Heart of New Ulm as a resource."

Miller herself grew up in New Ulm, and after travelling all over the world with her previous military career, she's happy to be back and share her passion and ideas for wellness based on what she's experienced in other places.

"As a mom of two young boys, I am overjoyed and enthusiastic that a program like Heart of New Ulm is available with resources to help people with healthy living and encourage them to get out and be a part of the community. That's what I thought was so great about coming back to New Ulm. After all the places that I've been, you get that sense of community and that small-town feel, but there's so many opportunities for a healthy lifestyle. That's what I see with the Heart of New Ulm and why I was so passionate that we have the program here for Firmenich to benefit."