Buyer Beware:

All that glitters is not gold, and claims made by diabetes programs may not show the whole truth

Introduction

Programs designed to control diabetes are a great way to provide a benefit to your employees and reduce preventable medical spend. However, vendors have a tendency to exaggerate their true results. It is more common than it should be for marketing specialists and salespeople to share only the "good statistics" and leave the bad ones out of the picture. It is important to look at the good and the bad to evaluate the impact a program truly has on both health outcomes and cost. Employers are paying for these programs and deserve to know if they are getting a true return on their investment. This article will provide you with the tools to critically evaluate a diabetes reduction program before choosing to implement it and explain how you can continue to protect your investment long after you sign a contract.

Evaluating the Initial Sales Pitch

Take sales pitches with a grain of salt. Of course, a program will put their best foot forward to increase their sales. However, Vital Incite has found that these marketing and sales tactics do not always stand up to an unbiased data analysis.

It may be difficult to see behind the pretty picture being presented by a company. It may even be impossible to know if they are presenting all of the data, or if the program will run as smoothly as they claim. Attempt to look past the marketing "fluff" to critically evaluate a pitch. Participant testimonials may evoke a positive emotional response, but this is anecdotal evidence and should not be used as valid data. Look at the facts and think about what information is missing. For example, if a diabetes program shows a chart of how much weight their participants have lost, ask how much weight other participants have gained. If a diabetes program shows that 80% of their participants had a controlled A1c after the program, ask how many were already controlled at the start of the program.

Take this scenario, for example. A diabetes program recently presented Figure 1 as their program's results. Vital Incite also examined the same data and presented Figure 2. Notice a difference? The program didn't show anyone who had a "negative" outcome of gaining weight. Additionally, you wouldn't know it from just looking at Figure 1, but the vendor chose to exclude certain participants from analysis based on arbitrary characteristics. This "picking and choosing" methodology did not accurately reflect the true program results. Skepticism when looking at vendor results like this is the key to finding a crack in the armor.

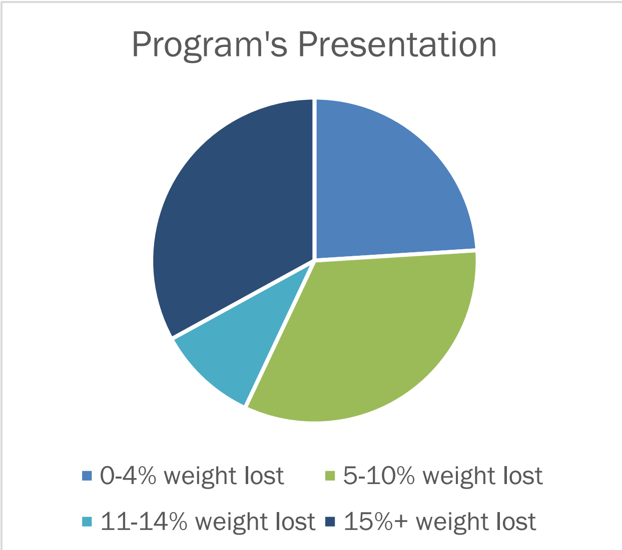


Figure 1

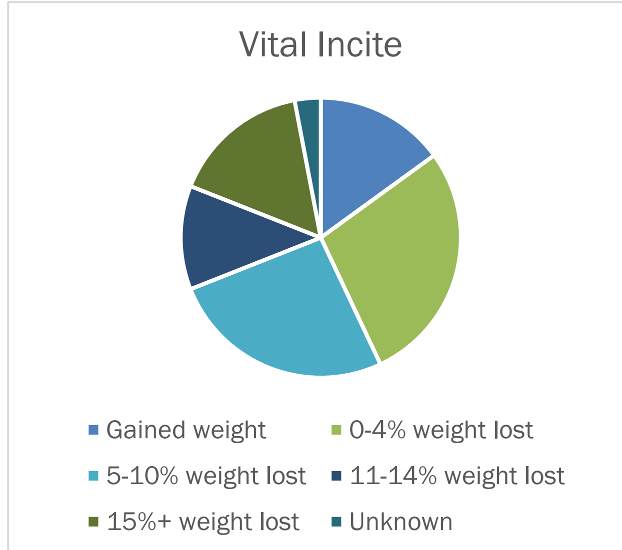


Figure 2

Another diabetes program engaged almost 400 people, but 70% had a controlled A1c when they started the program. When this expensive program was presenting its results, it claimed that the majority of their participants had a controlled A1c ***after*** one year of engagement in the program (Figure 3). Of course, the majority were controlled after the program because 70% were already controlled before the program! When Vital Incite compared the results of the participants who had an uncontrolled A1c before the program to a control group, there was no significant difference between engaging in the program and not engaging.

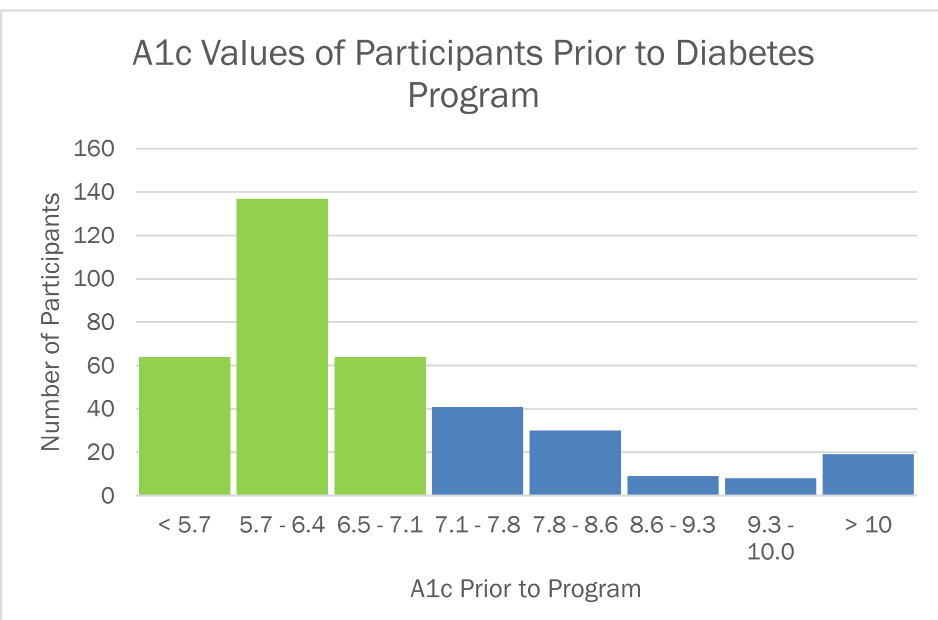


Figure 3: Green indicates a controlled A1c prior to beginning the diabetes program. Blue indicates an uncontrolled A1c prior to beginning.

Protecting your Investment

Diabetes programs can be a great way to invest in improving the health of your population. If you choose to make this investment, it is important to be involved in the program from start to finish and to critically review it to make sure you are getting your intended results.

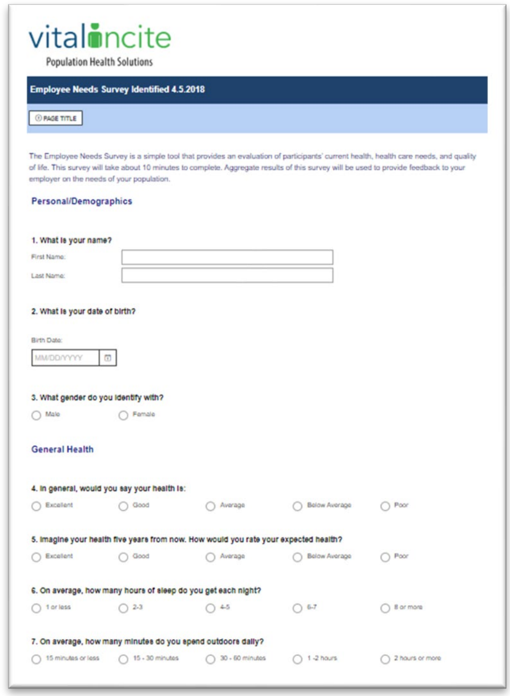
After deciding on a program, an employer should be involved in outlining the criteria for program participation eligibility. Further, the employer should set expectations of engagement rates and define monthly reporting requirements that will allow for monitoring of program progress. The employer needs to continuously monitor the program to make sure the program is selecting participants based on predetermined eligibility characteristics. For example, it seems obvious that diabetes programs should typically target diabetics with an uncontrolled A1c, but that does not always occur. If proper engagement does not occur from the start, it can affect your results at the end of the program. Having a strong presence in program development and engagement is the key to preventing wasted resources and skewed results.

Keep your program vendor accountable through performance guarantees that are negotiated before you sign a contract. Performance guarantees will provide an objective view over time of how the program is stacking up against its initial claims.
When possible, hire an independent third party to evaluate the outcomes. This will ensure that you are getting an unbiased evaluation of the program's progress and the employer's true return on investment. When the program itself reports on its own outcomes, ask to see the methodology behind their calculations. Are they systematically excluding certain participants to make their results look better? Are they using incorrect assumptions to arrive at their results? Have a healthy dose of skepticism when evaluating programs, and make sure you understand the facts behind their claims.

Have a say in who is selected as a participant. Make sure to select members who are ready and able to make changes to their lifestyle (i.e. don't select a nondiabetic for a diabetes reduction program). If possible, have members fill out a pre-program screening questionnaire, or application, to select people who are also mentally ready to make a positive healthcare change. Include guidelines for engagement in your initial negotiations with the vendor to make sure they measure up against a pre-set standard.

Final Considerations for Successful Program Implementation

Don't assume; ***ask*** your employees what they want and need. No matter how much care you put into evaluating the program before you buy it, it will not be impactful unless you have active engagement from your employees. For example, you may want to implement a diabetes program, but your employees would prefer a stress management program. To help determine what programs would be most impactful in your population, Vital Incite does offer our users an Employee Needs Survey at no cost.



vitalincite
Population Health Solutions

Employee Needs Survey Identified 4.5.2018

PAGE TITLE

The Employee Needs Survey is a simple tool that provides an evaluation of participants' current health, health care needs, and quality of life. This survey will take about 10 minutes to complete. Aggregate results of this survey will be used to provide feedback to your employer on the needs of your population.

Personal/Demographics

1. What is your name?

First Name:

Last Name:

2. What is your date of birth?

Birth Date:

MM/DD/YYYY

3. What gender do you identify with?

○ Male ○ Female

General Health

4. In general, would you say your health is:

○ Excellent ○ Good ○ Average ○ Below Average ○ Poor

5. Imagine your health five years from now. How would you rate your expected health?

○ Excellent ○ Good ○ Average ○ Below Average ○ Poor

6. On average, how many hours of sleep do you get each night?

○ 1 or less ○ 2-3 ○ 4-5 ○ 6-7 ○ 8 or more

7. On average, how many minutes do you spend outdoors daily?

○ 15 minutes or less ○ 15 - 30 minutes ○ 30 - 60 minutes ○ 1 -2 hours ○ 2 hours or more

If you do ask your employees what they want through a survey, incentivize the survey so the engagement is maximized. This will make the results as valid as possible and can lead to increased engagement, better outcomes, and maximized cost savings. Unfortunately, there is a growing concern of diabetes affecting medical spend and impacting employee health. Many employers are trying to offer programs to help their employees, which means that new diabetes programs are being created constantly. While these programs can be a great way to offer health benefits to your employee population, remember to evaluate your options with a fine-tooth comb since there are so many programs available, all with varying degrees of success. Staying cautious and keeping vendors accountable are the best ways to protect your investment.

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