



Hosting a Health Fair at Your Law Firm

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Corporate health fairs are a relatively new industry, and it is only in recent years that Corporate America has taken an active interest in the long-term health and wellness of its employees. Starting in the late 1980s, however, a few doctors' offices began to offer corporate health fairs and lectures as a way of gaining new patients for their practices. Most of these doctors did not participate as in-network providers through the insurance companies so they used local corporations as a creative avenue to get new patients. They offered educational lectures and screenings to corporations to create more demand for their services among the employees. In turn, they could grow their business with clients who they knew had top of the line, out-of-network, medical insurance benefits.

The initial growth of the corporate health fair industry was slow due to the relationship between doctors and corporations. Since doctors' offices were using corporate health fairs as a way to grow their businesses, the company's internal event planner (usually human resources or the corporate nurse) began to receive more and more employee complaints about high pressure sales tactics as well as expensive and confusing out-of-network billing from the doctor.

Many corporations coordinated their own events by inviting the doctors that they used personally. This was not the best solution as the internal coordinators would select doctors based on personality or availability because they simply did not have a lot of time or expertise to properly screen the doctors. Obvious conflicts of interest, such as the appearance of kickbacks and exhibitor favoritism, turned many corporations away from coordinating their own events. Then followed the lawsuits for implied endorsement when an employee had malpractice issues with the doctor who was personally invited to the event by the corporation. As a result, many corporations stopped offering health fairs because the problems simply outweighed the potential benefits.

With a shrinking number of corporations willing to host a health fair directly with a doctor's office, these out-of-network doctors once again had to get creative to gain access to the corporations. This eventually evolved into what is currently known as the health fair industry. Several national non profit corporate wellness companies were established for the sole purpose of selling memberships to doctors. With this membership a doctor could hire a marketing representative to contact corporations as a member of the non-profit so as to cloak the conflict of interest that had caused so many problems in the past.

In addition to the non-profit memberships, some doctors created their own health fair companies. This way the doctor's office could market itself as "ABC Health and Wellness Company" as opposed to "Dr. Joe's Office." In some cases, the doctor's wife would market to corporations using her maiden name to mask the conflict of interest that had banned them in the first place. This allowed them to avoid any non-solicitation policies of corporations. Of course, the doctors still had one thing in mind: filling their waiting rooms with corporate employees. Human resources professionals then had to deal with the complaints and thus chose other options to promote wellness to their employees.

Independently-Owned Health Fair Companies Change the Industry

Unlike a doctor's office, an independently-owned company views the corporation as its main client and is not interested in selling personal services to the employees. Independent companies have much higher standards and will not hesitate to "fire" an exhibitor who does not live up to these standards. With the advent of independently-owned health fair companies, corporations finally had the option to host a health fair where their needs came first.

Some of the many benefits of working with an independently owned health fair company include the following:

- Customized events;
- Enforcement of non-solicitation policies;
- Prescreened exhibitors;
- Protection from implied endorsement from doctor-owned companies;
- 100 % in-network medical exhibitors; and
- Reduction in medical insurance premium increases.

Due to this shift over to independently owned health fair companies, corporate health and wellness fairs began to become more popular. The reason for this is quite simple. The independently-owned health fair company's focus aligns with the corporation's desire to lower its medical insurance premiums by making employees healthier. This created a trusting relationship between the health fair company and the corporation, something that is rarely accomplished with doctor owned companies. As a result, corporations began to see more benefits than complaints from their health fairs.

The Benefits of Health Fairs

With health risk assessments, unbiased preventative screenings, in-network exhibitors and a true focus on employee health and wellness, corporations began to increase their demand for health fairs and corporate wellness events. The reasons for this are different for each corporation, but listed below are some of the primary ones.

Employers began to realize that healthy employees:

- Tend to be more productive;
- Tend to be happier and more satisfied with their jobs;
- Have more energy and stamina;
- Tend to be more creative; and
- Are less distracted and are more focused on their jobs.

Employers also began to realize that healthy employees cost the company less money because of:

- Fewer sick days;
- Fewer medical claims with fewer new illnesses;
- Decreased long-term medical costs as a result of fewer chronic illnesses; and
- Less lost production time from distracted employees.

Just like anything else, corporations want to make sure that they are not financially harming themselves or their employees with health fairs. They realize that when their health fair provider uses out-of-network exhibitors, it increases their overall insurance costs. As out-of-network doctors are not as closely regulated by medical insurance companies, they bill five to ten times more for a single service than in-network doctors. This extra cost to the medical insurance company is then passed onto the corporation as part of the next year's premium. This defeats the purpose of holding health fairs as they are supposed to decrease or slow premium growth, not increase it.

Know the People with Whom You Are Working

Fortunately, there are many things that corporations can do to ensure they are dealing with a high quality, independently-owned health fair company.

1. Find out who you are working with by finding out who actually owns the health fair company. If it is up-front and tells you that it is a doctor's office, then you should determine if that is the best fit for your organization. If you find out that it is a doctor's office that is pretending to be a health fair company, then you have to decide if you want to work with a group that is not being up-front about its intentions.
2. Insist that every medical exhibitor is 100 % in-network with your insurance plan (or the program that the majority of your employees participate in if there are options). Find out how the health fair company plans on guaranteeing this, and make sure that you get this in writing. It is better to be safe than sorry. Remember that "Accepts Your Insurance" or "Will Work With Your Insurance Plan" is not the same as In-Network.
3. Consider the long-term financial impact that could be obtained through proper health and wellness programming. Make sure to design an event that has a "preventative" and "wellness" component to it and to stress taking personal responsibility and action toward living a healthier lifestyle.
4. Make sure your health fair provider is independently insured with liability and errors and emissions policies to help insulate your liability.
5. Make sure you are working with a well-established health fair company that has a track record of successful events. It should have a minimum of five years of experience and provide over 100 health fairs per year. Ask for references and call them.
6. Only work with a full service corporate health & wellness event coordinator. A group that can only do a limited number of services will try to steer you toward those services only.

How do you know if you are working with a doctor-owned health fair company? Many doctors will offer free screenings up front because they stand to earn thousands of dollars on the back end through your medical insurance. Here are the warning signs:

- glucose and total cholesterol screenings;
- Free half-hour massage for every employee who attends or who comes in for an initial medical visit;
- Free lunch. (Have you ever heard of a free lunch that is actually free?);
- Limited number of services. (Prepackaged events.);
- Ability to schedule a health fair with less than four weeks' notice; and
- Will only work with companies having "good" medical insurance (meaning PPOs and not HMOs).

Health fairs can be fun, educational and can be done at very little cost. Most companies charge an administrative fee and then fees for various services and activities along with a host of free services. Depending on the population, they can be held for a half day or a whole day and can be an integral part of your firm's overall employee benefits and wellness objectives. Activities can include paraffin wax treatments, fruit smoothies, martial arts, aromatherapy, yoga, pilates, and massages which are fun and healthy and which your employees will love. More routine services such as flu shots, cholesterol screenings, bone density tests, pulmonary function and skin damage screenings, family fitness and health sessions, information on vitamins and toxic free household products can also be offered.

The corporate health fair industry is much better off today than it was 10 years ago. With more corporations taking the proper steps to ensure the best health fairs possible for their employees, this is sure to hold true as the industry continues to grow.

John Buckley is a Johns Hopkins University graduate who looked at a career in medicine as a vehicle to help people learn how to live happier and healthier lives. In the fall of 2000, John took over OpenHouse Direct, and since then, the company has experienced rapid growth. In 2006, the company delivered over 230 health and wellness events in 22 states reaching over 250,000 corporate employees through direct corporate marketing and servicing over 100,000 corporate employees through event attendance.

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