

IDPH – Vending Research Phase One Report

BACKGROUND

The IDPH is planning to implement vending policies in Iowa worksites to help combat obesity by creating a more supportive nutritional environment in the workplace where workers have an opportunity to make healthy choices when using vending machines during the workday. Phase One of the research to support this initiative is designed to gather information for a foundational understanding of current vending machine habits, beliefs, motivations and attitudes among the target audiences. This information will be used to create effective targeted messages for social marketing promotion of healthy choices when making vending purchases. State rest areas were included in the research as it is part of the IDPH initiative to address vending machine users in all state owned buildings, rest areas and state parks.

METHODOLOGY AND AUDIENCES STUDIED

Seven worksites and two state rest areas were used to conduct onsite research during April and May 2011. Participating companies were promised confidentiality in reporting, so the profiles of each type of company are reported here. The locations were spread across the state of Iowa.


Respondent Segments	# Interviews
White Collar Urban – two locations were used, one a state agency employer and one a large Fortune 500 employer with an onsite cafeteria, employee exercise facilities and their own “green” labels signaling better vending choices. Both are located in urban centers walking distance to restaurants.	11
White Collar Suburban – a mid-size insurance company. Vending includes an ice cream vending machine and part of a refrigerated machine dedicated to yogurt & fruit.	6
White Collar Rural – a rural hospital location with a cafeteria on premises.	7
Blue Collar Urban – an electrical parts supplier. Wellness efforts include weight loss challenges. The break room has animal crackers and pretzels provided by the company available for employee snacking. Vending machines include a refrigerated one with some sandwiches. Fast food options within walking distance.	7
Blue Collar Suburban – an active retirement community employer with an onsite cafeteria for residents. One vending machine offered leftover salads, fruits, vegetables, entrees and sandwiches from the cafeteria at prices of \$.25 - .50 per item. These items looked fresh with taste appeal, restocked daily by cafeteria staff.	5
Blue Collar Rural – a metals machining company that provides fruit for employees at the start of each week, it’s usually gone by Thursday. Some employees are part of a wellness committee that works to raise awareness of nutrition and exercise.	8
Rest Area located on I-29 SB near Sergeant Bluff	7
Rest Area located on I-80 EB near Underwood	4
Total Respondents	55

It should be noted that several other companies were approached regarding participation in this study and declined. There may be an element of self-selection bias in that the companies willing to participate are more interested in employee wellness and are open to

discussion and exploration on the topic while some other companies may not currently have a similar level of attention to this issue. This factor plays out in the cultural environment of the companies visited where employees often mentioned the company's wellness efforts in the interviews.

Methodology:

All interviews were done in the vending machine environment to capture in-the-moment-of-purchase thoughts and visual cues that help with detailed responses. Respondents were invited to participate in a short 7 - 10 minute interview as they completed vending machine purchases. Topics discussed included reason for purchase, assortment & selection of products, habits of vending use, snacking habits, nutrition label attention & understanding, respondent attitudes & habits regarding their dietary intake in general. Respondents were shown a summary of the NEMS-V "traffic light" proposed labeling scheme to get their input.



The food and beverage standards are divided into color codes based on their nutrition profiles.

- RED food and beverages are not as healthy and fall outside the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.
- YELLOW food and beverages are healthy foods that meet the Dietary Guidelines, but do not provide a serving of fruit, vegetable, low-fat dairy or whole grain.
- Food and beverages in the GREEN category are considered the healthiest, are consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and provide a serving of fruit, vegetable, low-fat dairy or whole grain.

KEY INSIGHTS:

- It appears fairly well ingrained in respondents' minds that going to a vending machines means approaching a source of junk food. There is very limited expectation of healthy food choices. For some, this provides all the permission they need to choose less healthy foods. The environment creates lowered expectations both in terms of what is available and what behavior is expected of the consumer in terms of making smart nutrition choices.
- Many employees do appear to be influenced by their environment, both in terms of colleagues and company initiatives. Encouragement to take care of their health through better nutritional choices does seem to help keep them on track.
- A majority of respondents said that labeling products in vending machines would influence their purchase decision. Vending machines currently have the "junk food halo" so consumers don't expect to make healthy choices currently when they approach vending purchases. The proposed labeling appears that it would help interrupt that train of expectation and thought and reframe the vending idea that can include some healthier options.

- Many were very interested and enthusiastic about having additional nutritious or healthier options made available, and that these options would be highlighted.
- Many self-professed “non-label readers” were very positive about the proposed vending labeling because it is a quick and simple way to advise people on healthier options.
- Key concerns about healthier options being available:
 - Cost of these items generally perceived to be higher than less healthy options.
 - Freshness of these items. Healthier items like fruit, yogurt, milk, and sandwiches have a short shelf life. Respondents tended to be wary of items that sit in a vending machine without preservatives.
- Key reasons for vending machine purchases:
 - Failure to eat breakfast creates hunger later in the day.
 - People get out of their routine of bringing snacks and/or lunch from home and so need to fill in with vending machine purchases.
 - Visiting vending is a break from work activities, a reason to get away from their desks or workstations.
 - Sometimes the vending machine is the destination because people know “it’s full of junk” and they are in the mood for something salty or sweet.
 - Many white-collar workers crave something in the mid-afternoon. This helps to “keep them going” and also acts as a “reward” or treat / indulgence for some. Most of these employees were likely to say they had a pretty healthy diet overall, so a small indulgence was okay for them.
- Blue collar respondents were less likely to say they tended to read nutrition labels when grocery shopping, preferring to chose “what tastes good”. However, they embraced the idea of proposed vending labels with many saying it would influence their decision at point of purchase, and encourage them towards healthier choices.
- Rest area vending users displayed different attitudes and considerations regarding purchases made in that environment versus the workplace respondents. It was far more likely for people to adopt an “on the road” mentality where they let go of everyday healthy eating habits to have a treat / indulgence aka “junk food” while on a road trip.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Changing the mix of products available in combination with messaging of raised expectations of both the environment and the choices consumers can make for their health will be an important combination. The success of the message testing in the last phase of this project will be impacted by the mix of products available in test locations. Respondents want more of the perceived “green” items. Frequently mentioned items included trail mix, granola bars, energy bars / power bars, a healthy chocolate option, mini-carrots, yogurt, milk, string cheese, fresh sandwiches and fruit, particularly whole apples, bananas and oranges. Clearly readable freshness dating will be important too for many of these items.
- There will need to be clarity around the idea that the red-yellow-green labeling is actually about *including* more of the “good stuff” e.g. whole grains, low-fat dairy, fruits and vegetables rather than *limiting* “bad stuff” like excess calories, fat, sugar and sodium. Respondents tend to think more often in terms of these limits rather than emphasizing get enough of the “good stuff”.
- Capitalize on an underlying feeling of many that is “You know what the right thing to do is” e.g. now that you know better (because of the labeling) you can do better (with your nutrition choices). Testing may need to include positively reinforcing versions of this idea and slightly negative versions, incorporating an idea of policing yourself better on your nutritional choices and giving yourself a little less slack.
- Communications need to work to reframe the idea of vending towards one of a range of nutritional options. Right now they think of it as mostly all junk food and tend to set aside nutritional considerations or give themselves more latitude to choose poorly. Going forward, creating awareness and building on the idea that it is possible to make healthy (“green option”) choices in a vending environment.
- Communications may need to have secondary elements that direct consumers to a website with more information, for those who want to understand more about the “bigger picture” of how snack choices fit into overall nutrition and the program overall.

DETAILED FINDINGS:

Blue Collar Employees

- Directionally, blue collar workers were not very likely to say they were label readers. In our small sample, only 25% (5 respondents out of 20) said they read nutrition

labels. However, a strong majority said they would be influenced by the red / yellow / green labeling to consider better choices because it was easy and quick to use.

- Comments of people who said they wouldn't be influenced by proposed vending labels reflect a focus on the enjoyment of eating snacks that they like and an attitude that the snacks they consume don't really have much impact on them overall:

"It wouldn't really matter for me, I have a habit of getting what I like. I want to keep my blood sugar up."

"I think that's good for people who are into the health kick. It wouldn't really influence me. (My philosophy is) Enjoy what I eat. You only live once."

"I'm going to go for what I like, the serving is not that big, it's not a big deal."

"Everyone's an adult, they know when they go to the vending machine that candy bars aren't good for you."

"I'm not very health conscious, I go for the taste. So this wouldn't work for me."

- A handful of blue collar respondents stated that they've actively made strides to improve their eating habits, and coincidentally, all three worked at the same location that puts out fresh fruit for the employees every Monday.

"I used to buy chips, and now I don't because of wellness committee, I also go to the VA and see a nutritionist, I have a plan, and I've lost 15 pounds."

"I'm trying to cut down on intake overall. For example, eating half a microwave pizza instead of the whole thing."

"I read food labels now. My wife and I are doing it to lose weight."

"It's a new thing for me to eat breakfast."

White Collar Employees

- White Collar Employees were very likely to say they paid attention to nutrition labels with 19 of 24 (79%) in the respondent sample saying they looked at labels at least some of the time.
- Vending is viewed as a non-nutritional environment. Many respondents seemed to give themselves permission to ignore everything they know about nutrition and just

pick “junk”. Others visit the vending area with very low expectations for nutritious offerings, leaving empty-handed or generally avoiding the vending machines altogether. These represent missed sales opportunities for the vending supplier.

“I don’t really think about nutrition content when I come to vending. It’s not something I buy all the time.”

“The choices aren’t very healthy. Sometimes I look and don’t get anything.”

“I was looking today, there’s nothing, so I had to get a candy bar instead. Ultimately it’s what’s available.”

“I’m on weight watchers so I don’t use the vending machines very often because they don’t have much that’s healthy.”

- Respondents said “sometimes you just NEED CHOCOLATE!” One of the most frequently selected snacks and most ardently defended was chocolate – Snickers and M&M’s were popular in this category.

“I come for Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups. I crave it the afternoon. Please keep the Reese’s stocked.”

“Of course there are days it won’t matter, I’m getting chocolate.”

“Got to keep some chocolate in the vending machines.”

“I just wanted chocolate. I usually crave a piece of chocolate this time of day, maybe to wake me up a little.”

“I get chocolate at work because I can’t keep it at home, the kids will eat it up.”

- White collar respondents were more often “rationalizing” their snack indulgences, either because it was the “wiggle room” in their overall approach to eating or because they exercised regularly which allowed for their indulgences.

“We’re allowed so many extra points per week (on Weight Watchers) and so I’m using my points on the M&M’s.”

“Moderation – there is nothing I say I can’t eat. A dessert is okay.”

“I don’t care when I want something sweet. I’m pretty good for my meals, so a sweet is okay.”

“If I’ve had just a salad for lunch, I will get something sweet in the afternoon.”

“I don’t look at the nutrition on the Snickers and don’t care. I exercise, so in my mind I work it off.”

“It’s a habit to come over here in the afternoon. I workout at lunch probably 4 days a week.”

“I work out pretty hard. So when I want it I don’t deny myself. I use “vendo-land” when I want my sweet or Diet Mt Dew.”

“I think it would make you think about it, before you make your selection. For me, I work out enough that I could cheat a little. It does remind you.”

- White collar workers talked about stress eating a fair amount. Going to get the snack provided a break from the stress and foods chosen were often comforting in some way.

“It depends on how stressful work is, when it’s stressful, I’m down here two – three times a week. I need something.”

“I get peanuts... when it’s been a really hard day, I want the chocolate, but I get the peanuts. If there’s better options there’s less temptation to choose the bad stuff.”

“Today with it being an aggravating morning, I just needed something.”

Rest area users had some specific attitudes and habits that differed from the workplace

- Some of the respondents stated they had very healthy eating habits at home, focusing on fruit and vegetables for snacks, reading labels and being mindful of their diets, but that discipline did not really apply when “on the road”. It appeared they saw their vending machine purchases as incidental and having little impact on their overall diet. Moreover, the treats were something they either needed or deserved while on the road.

“It doesn’t make a difference to me anymore. You’re gonna eat it anyway. When you’re driving, it’s comfort...” - David

“I almost went with the pretzels, but I’m on vacation, and Doritos are vacation food. I wanted something enjoyable to eat on the road.” – Cindy

“I don’t do this very often, so I can do it.” – Robin

“It’s always good to road trip with a little munchie, I just wanted to see what I could be naughty with.” - Sheralyn

- Some respondents saw the proposed vending labels as fitting in with their ‘hurry-up and get going’ mentality while on the road. One person stated he would have made an additional purchase if the healthy choices were highlighted for him so he could pick quickly.

“It would be a good thing (the labeling) and help me when I’m in a hurry.” – David

“It’s good – simple, quick and self-explanatory... - Ernie, a truck driver

“I might have gotten a second item (besides M&M’s he bought for his wife) because it would help me know what things are better for me.” – William

- Several of the respondents noted that snacks helped keep them alert while driving, and that helped justify whatever choice they made.

Global Concerns Across Segments

There was an interesting contrast between two companies that both had sandwiches/ prepared foods available within the vending area. The contrast in attitudes highlights the importance of freshness as well as pricing for certain items. Freshness concerns were also mentioned by rest area respondents when contemplating healthier options.

- Comments from employees with the machine stocked with pre-packaged sandwiches reflect their lack of taste appeal:

“It’s terrible. The sandwiches aren’t anything I would ever eat even if I were really hungry. Disgusting...”

“I call it the wheel of death (refrigerated vending machine) I don’t know if they are all that fresh.”

“Most of it doesn’t look good to me (in refrigerated vending) so I wouldn’t get it.”

“I never get the sandwiches, they’re kind of gross.”

- Comments from employees with the machine stocked by the cafeteria leftovers daily reflected that the products were highly acceptable and well priced. This was so distinctly different from the other three vending machines next to it that respondents did not mention it as one of their “vending” purchases until prompted by the researcher. Clearly, though it was a vending machine, it did not fit the respondent idea of what a vending machine is and can offer. It was a different animal, unique among all the vending environments in this study.

“I will get the salads or the tuna or chicken sandwich, they’re good & quick.”

“One time I got leftover salmon that was to die for, it was \$.50!”

“Sometimes it has fruit in it or cut up vegetables, I will get that.”

- Pricing is a concern of many respondents and a reason they don't indulge the vending machine more often. Many expressed concern that if healthier options were available, the price would be prohibitively high.

“The prices of the bad things are better than the prices of the good things.”

“I get stuff, it depends on when I have money.”

“If I don't have anything for lunch, or I'm low on funds, chips will be for lunch. It's kind of a last resort.”

“\$.80 ...waaaay more expensive than what I get at Target.”

“I bring stuff from home because it's a dollar a candy bar here, can't do that every day.”

Impact of Proposed Labeling

Respondents predicted the labeling to have a range of impacts. Many said they would reconsider their choices and try to move up from a red labeled item to a yellow, or from a yellow to a green, and this idea of incremental change can be supported within this structure. Some respondents thought it would introduce them to new snacks by encouraging them to try new “better for you” options. Some respondents said the impact would spill over into their grocery shopping where they would take the green labeled products as a cue for good items to purchase in the grocery store.

“I think I would be swayed. I like it. You'd find a lot less people buying red items.”

“It would make me look at things a little more, if something had a green label, I might also look for it in the grocery store.”

“I think that's a great idea! I find myself using the NuVal at Hy-Vee for the cereals to pick the ones with the most nutrition. I use it a lot now because it's so easy. So this would be like that.”

“I think most people would relate to this, being like a stop light. It would probably influence me, I wouldn't get something labeled red.”

“I like the visual, the color coding, it's easy to follow & understand.”

“Good idea. Like right now, the stuff on the right hand side of our vending machines is supposed to be better for you.”

- Some respondents thought that situationally the labeling might work for them, but there would be times they would choose to ignore it, such as when they had strong cravings, on very stressful days or something they felt strongly about for other reasons.

“On a pretty easy-going day, I might change my mind, but some days I need my treat.”

“If it’s a product I already know about, it wouldn’t change my buying but if it’s a product I don’t know, it would influence me.”

- Some respondents still wanted to know more and have a broader context of how the snack labeling worked and how many servings of fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy and whole grains they were supposed to have each day.

“It’s a good idea. I want to know why it’s labeled healthy though, not just that it’s green.”

“It would be good to know how much you’re supposed to have of each thing, servings, how it fits in the food pyramid.”

- Food options expansion was seen as an important part of this initiative. Some respondents felt their vending environment currently has nothing that could be labeled green and/or mostly items that would be labeled red.

“The better mix of stuff that goes with it would be really good. I’d like mini carrots. Sliced apples in packages like at the grocery store.”

“I would get yogurt if it was light version and fresh. If the fruit looked good, I’d get it – apples, oranges, bananas.”

“Yogurt, fruit, string cheese – absolutely!”

“...dark chocolate, energy bars, protein bars...”

“...something a little more substantial for when you couldn’t get anything else.”