

## March 2019 Issue

### Forging Community Partnerships

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*Retail RDs are making alliances in their communities to help boost foot traffic, good publicity, and the bottom line.*

The role of a retail dietitian can vary greatly depending on the supermarket chain. While some chains employ hundreds of dietitians, or one for every store, others may employ only one dietitian who oversees hundreds of locations. Regardless of the breadth of responsibility, retail RDs constantly seek new and innovative ways to add value to their retailers.

One of the ways dietitians add value beyond selling groceries is by establishing community partnerships, which can foster good publicity and strengthen community bonds, increase foot traffic in stores, and even lessen the workload of the dietitian. ***Today's Dietitian*** speaks with RDs from four retailers across the country about the community partnerships they've formed and how these alliances have helped promote their supermarket chains and increase their bottom line.

### Dig With a Dietitian Program at Reasor's

For four years, Heather Steele, RD, LD, has served as the only dietitian for Reasor's in Oklahoma, where she oversees 18 stores in various locations across the state. Recently, Steele went back to her roots by starting the Dig With a Dietitian program, an idea that stemmed from a personal history of gardening and her time volunteering at a local food bank in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma.

Steele says she was surprised to learn how many children didn't understand where fruits and vegetables came from, a recurring topic during many of her children's events at Reasor's. When she learned that the Broken Arrow Neighbors Community Garden needed volunteers, she thought a partnership with the supermarket chain would be perfect. "I thought, what a fun opportunity for children to see where fruits and vegetables are coming from and to get them more excited about it," Steele says. She approached Broken Arrow Neighbors with the partnership idea, and the program was born.

The Dig With a Dietitian program is a children's nutrition and gardening education class that takes place once or twice per month from March through November at the Broken Arrow Neighbors Community Garden. The program is free for all participants with a maximum enrollment of around 15 to 20 children, who must register for the class on the Reasor's website. Classes last one hour, and topics vary each month. Steele has taught children about composting and the importance of nutrients in soil, summertime vegetables, and seeds. Typically, classes start with a nutrition lesson that lasts about 20 minutes, and the remainder of the class is spent in the garden. The activity in the garden is always relevant to the lesson.

Though Steele facilitates and teaches each class, she tries to further encourage and strengthen community bonds by inviting local experts. For instance, one class covered the topic of bees and pollination, so Steele invited a local beekeeper to speak; another class focused on the importance of bugs, and Steele invited members from the library to read a book about bugs. For her composting class, Steele invited a master gardener from Oklahoma State University, and for her class on hydration she welcomed an environmental specialist who discussed the treatment of water.

The community partnerships extend further through a volunteer program that Steele also facilitates. Local high school students in the National Honor Society obtain volunteer hours by helping with the Dig With a Dietitian program.

The program is only a year old, but the possibilities seem endless, Steele says, as she's always developing new ideas on how to improve it. This year, Steele will reserve two extra garden beds, giving participants the opportunity to taste the produce. She says she hopes to add a cooking segment to the Dig With a Dietitian program to use the produce they grow in the two extra garden beds. She's also exploring the opportunity of hosting adult classes and forming a partnership with a local college to use its greenhouse—which will mean Dig With a Dietitian can be offered year-round.

Though the program is young, it has already received much attention and good publicity. In 2018, Steele's peers at the Oklahoma Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics named her Emerging Dietetic Leader, and she won the 2018 Community Champion in Progressive Grocer's Outreach Innovation awards for her Dig With a Dietitian program.

While the Dig With a Dietitian class has garnered good publicity for Reasor's, Steele says the popularity of the free gardening program has led to increased enrollment in her other classes that require a fee, resulting in additional revenue for the chain.

### **Store Tours, Cooking Demos Reign at Meijer**

Sheri Steinbach, MS, RDN, was the first dietitian at Meijer. She started and oversaw the retailer's health and wellness program from 2003 to 2016. With more than 200 store locations in Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio, and Wisconsin, there were only six regional dietitians serving all locations.

Steinbach says her team was directed to connect with the community to promote Meijer stores and brands, so they brainstormed ideas to forge community bonds that were attainable and sustainable. They decided to offer a dietitian training program to clinical dietitians and those who worked in other community segments. The training program would teach certain skills retail RDs have, such as how to conduct grocery store tours or cooking demonstrations. The goal was to encourage the participating dietitians to bring their own clients and patients to Meijer, which would increase the chain's customer base, promote good community relations, and increase the Meijer dietitians' reach without adding to their workload.

Steinbach says her team thought the connection was important, but she wanted to ensure the community also saw the need. They attended state dietetic association meetings to conduct surveys on what types of partnerships and activities they should be involved with. "It was an overwhelming yes that they wanted to connect, and the two topics of store tours and cooking demonstrations came out on top," Steinbach says.

Once Steinbach and the other dietitians determined the communities' needs, they documented contact information and locations of all interested RDs to decide where to host the trainings. Then, they formulated a plan and set the wheels in motion.

The Meijer dietitian trainings each lasted three hours and featured one topic per class: One training focused on hosting a grocery store tour and another on how to conduct a cooking demonstration. The training classes were free for all attendees and had a limit of 25 to 30 people. Steinbach says three hours of continuing education credits were awarded to participants to further incentivize people to attend.

The store tour trainings started with educational presentations, covering everything dietitians should know about hosting grocery store tours, including what time of day to host a store tour, the proper group size, checking in with store management, and where to store coats and belongings. The class also included topics for dietitians to discuss during store tours, such as how to read and understand messages on product packaging, ingredient lists, and nutrition facts panels. Steinbach says they discussed Meijer private-label products, gave attendees detailed documents and tools, such as laminated tour guides, color-coded talking points based on medical condition, and pharmacy information. After the presentations, attendees would go into the store to role-play a mock store tour, enabling them to practice and ask questions.

Cooking demonstration training classes took place in a Meijer test kitchen and started with a presentation that provided detailed tips for a successful demo, such as choosing the right recipe and important talking points. Steinbach says they focused mainly on Meijer's private-label products and allowed each participant to conduct his or her own cooking demonstration. Afterwards, attendees received Meijer gift cards to help fund their first demonstration.

Steinbach says 400 dietitians signed up for the store tour and cooking demonstration training program and that Meijer was pleased with the results. Attendees were asked to tell Steinbach and her group whenever they hosted store tours to demonstrate the increase in events following the trainings. "We expanded our outreach into the community and created goodwill because we could show that Meijer was a community partner," Steinbach says.

Though Meijer no longer employs dietitians, the benefits of the dietitian training program continue to live on. Large hospitals and other community dietitians that had attended the training program host store tours regularly.

### **Steps to Wellness and Food City's Wellness Club Join Forces**

Elizabeth Hall, MS, RD, is the only RD employed at Food City and one of three people in its Healthy Initiatives department overseeing 134 stores. Because the small team covers such a large area, community partnerships have been key to promoting the chain and its health initiatives. One partnership that Hall says is most notable is the chain's partnership with Summit Medical Group that developed its Steps to Wellness program.

Steps to Wellness is a 12-month program that provides guidance and education on nutrition, exercise, weight management, and general wellness.<sup>1</sup> Summit Medical Center dietitians lead the classes, which meet once per month. For the first six months, participants learn in a classroom setting; for the remaining six months, they maintain what they've learned in a classroom or interactive setting such as a store tour or cooking demonstration, or by attending a webinar. Class locations are held in stores throughout Tennessee in Greeneville, Jefferson City, Knoxville, and Oak Ridge. Enrollment is based on physician recommendation; classes start every few weeks with class size ranging from 25 to 30 people.

Hall says Summit Medical Group approached Food City about the partnership, and the two entities saw it as a great way to promote one another and enhance the program. Coincidentally, Food City launched its own Wellness Club at the same time, so all patients enrolled in the Food City Wellness Club are also enrolled in the Steps to Wellness program. The Wellness Club is an additional aspect of Food City's existing loyalty program in which shoppers can sign up for coupons and special discounts. The Wellness Club offers extra benefits, such as monthly e-mails from Hall featuring recipes and nutrition tips, access to Hall's contact information, free prescriptions, discounted diabetes supplies, and bonus discounts on dietitian's choice products.

As part of the partnership with Summit Medical Group and its Steps to Wellness program, Hall visits the first class of each group to discuss offerings at Food City and how the retailer can help with their health and wellness journey. Hall also offers each group a store tour and hosts quarterly cooking

demonstrations where participants can enjoy a full meal courtesy of Food City. Participants earn points for each class they attend, which they can use to enter a drawing for prizes, Hall says. Food City also donates prizes such as free NASCAR tickets.

If Hall doesn't attend a class, Food City still contributes educational materials, such as tips for shopping on a budget. To date, there are about 150 participants in Steps to Wellness, and Summit Medical Group is exploring the possibility of introducing children's classes. Hall says the partnership with Summit Medical Group has generated good publicity for Food City and increased the size of its Wellness Club, which now has 50,000 members. The Healthy Initiatives team has been so pleased with the partnership that they're now working on partnering with other health entities on a larger scale. "I think from an outsider's perspective a partnership looks good because it shows that Food City is focused on the goal of helping customers with health and wellness," Hall says.

### **H-E-B Links With Humana**

Another chain that has partnered with a health care entity is H-E-B. Humana, a health insurance company, approached H-E-B to become part of its community health efforts shortly after announcing its Bold Goal initiative for San Antonio. The Bold Goal initiative was launched to improve the health of communities 20% by 2020.<sup>2</sup> The initiative focuses on nine cities, including San Antonio, where H-E-B is headquartered. One aspect of the Bold Goal San Antonio is Path to Wellness, a partnership involving community clinics, H-E-B, and the YMCA of Greater San Antonio, which focuses specifically on type 2 diabetes management.

As partners in the Humana effort, H-E-B's San Antonio dietitians are paired with select primary care clinics to provide nutrition counseling to referred patients. Referred patients are eligible for three MNT visits with an H-E-B dietitian. The first consultation focuses on medical history, diet recall, and discussions about A1c, glucose, and diet modifications. The dietitians have an electronic charting system to keep detailed notes. Consultations also focus on shopping habits, and dietitians can walk the stores with patients to answer questions. After the three visits, patients return to their clinic for biometric measurements and an update on their health.

Stacy Bates, MS, RDN, LD, CDE, H-E-B corporate registered dietitian and nutrition services program manager, is one of three H-E-B dietitians located in the San Antonio area and oversees the dietitian program. She says being a partner of Path to Wellness was an easy transition because her team of dietitians already was providing nutrition counseling under its commercial insurance, billing patients through their private insurance rather than charging an out-of-pocket fee. The partnership with Humana enabled the dietitians to expand their services because Humana expedited a contract for them to take patients under Medicare and Medicaid, increasing the number of patients they could see, thus increasing their revenue. Since starting the partnership two years ago, Bates says they have seen 250 patients as part of the Path to Wellness program.

In addition, Bates says data from H-E-B's loyalty card program show that customers who visit with a dietitian in-store typically increase the number of items they purchase per shopping trip. She also says that many of the patients they see through the Humana partnership return after the three covered visits are completed, which is another boost to their bottom line.

While increasing the bottom line is important for dietitians at a for-profit business, Bates says she's most proud of the great strides they've made with this partnership to increase the health of their community. She says she's looking forward to exploring new opportunities in the future to expand the program with other health entities and possibly exploring additional markets, such as Houston.

### **The Takeaway**

As with most RDs, the desire to help people is ever present, but in retail there's added pressure to make a profit, which can be challenging. Forging community partnerships can be a way to accomplish

both feats. As seen by Steele, Steinbach, Hall, and Bates, community partnerships can serve to promote retailers while also fostering good community relations and strengthening community bonds. The opportunities seem endless and can be tailored to the retailer and the dietitians involved, which may help ease the workload of the RDs and please the companies for which they work.

— *Esther L. Ellis, MS, RD, LDN, is a freelance writer based in Chicago.*

## References

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