Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation triples membership in first year, launches program in all of its priority areas

By Lisa Gable

It started with 41 food companies, trade associations and non-governmental organizations coming together to help reduce obesity, especially childhood obesity. The result was the Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation. The goal of combating obesity is as challenging as it is important. That is why the Foundation has taken a look at what we have achieved and what we plan to achieve in the near future, in our annual report.

One of the most important differences we have made is to bring together people who are committed to combating obesity. The 41 founding members have grown into more than 135 organizations, united to develop practical solutions to America’s obesity problem by promoting active, healthy lifestyles. These organizations – including retailers, food and beverage manufacturers, sporting goods and insurance companies, restaurants, a professional sports association, trade associations, NGOs, professional athletes and the U.S. Army – talk to millions of people every day.

Bringing organizations like this together focuses enormous attention on the problem of obesity, and some of the things that can be done about it.

Of course, bringing people together is just the start. There is no one, easy solution to the obesity problem. We have been pursuing our mission where Americans spend a majority of their time – in schools, in the workplace, and in the marketplace, as well as through broad public education.

In schools, the Foundation launched Energy Balance 101, available for free online and at more than half our nation’s elementary schools. This new curriculum, powered by Discovery Education, provides teachers with free energy balance curriculum for the K-2 and 3-5 grade bands. Teachers can use these tools to help young people achieve a healthy weight through energy balance – balancing calories consumed with calories expended through physical activity.
The annual report also describes the Foundation’s principal initiative in the marketplace, where member companies will work to provide consumers with options to reduce their calorie intake, improve their overall nutrition and close the energy gap. Member companies – joined by First Lady Michelle Obama – pledged on May 17th to reduce 1.5 trillion annual calories by the end of 2015. The Foundation explained that its member companies will pursue this goal through new lower-calorie options, reduced calorie content of current products, or reducing portion sizes of existing single-serve products.

The Foundation will issue annual progress reports to the Partnership for a Healthier America, chaired by the First Lady. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation will support an independent evaluation of how this effort is affecting calories consumed by children and adolescents.

In the workplace, members began to comprehensively measure their wellness programs on an annual basis, and share what they learn with the rest of corporate America.

The survey found that the impact of company efforts is beginning to show up in improved employee health, such as a 3.4 percentage point increase in people having a healthy weight. The biggest challenge? Getting employees to participate. Foundation members have been finding that incentives – financial and non-financial – have helped remove barriers between employees and healthy behavior. In fact, 58 percent of participating employers provide cash rewards to employees who achieved or progressed toward a healthy weight. But encouraging a healthy workforce doesn’t have to take a huge financial commitment. In partnership with the National Business Group on Health, the Foundation launched www.YourWellnessAdvantage.com, a one-stop website offering turnkey solutions that small and medium-sized businesses can choose from in promoting a healthy workplace.

Obviously, the Foundation has only begun to scratch the surface toward its goals. We will build on our partnership with Discovery Education, and monitor the success of Energy Balance 101. The Foundation will continue to conduct annual evaluations of member programs, and expects continuous improvement. We are adding a Wellness Services Locator, a central resource directory that small and medium-sized businesses will be able to use to find nearby wellness services that are available to their employees. HWCF will launch a social media program aimed at encouraging and supporting families to pursue healthy lifestyles that help curb and prevent obesity.

One thing we have found in our first year of the Foundation’s existence is the willingness of so many organizations and people to work together to address the critical national problem of obesity. More than anything else, this spirit of cooperation is the biggest asset we bring to meeting the challenge.

Lisa Gable is executive director of the Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation, a first-of-its kind coalition aimed at addressing the challenge of obesity – especially childhood obesity.