How to tell if your vendor's claims are valid: Part Six

Inaccurate marketing claims and outcomes reports are proliferating. The Validation Institute has staked out a position as the leader in assisting/promoting vendors and consultants in the "Integrity Segment" of the healthcare services market.

How can you tell if your adviser is in the Integrity Segment? The easiest way: did they send you to this series or did you have to find it on your own?

Engaging employees in their health benefits is very hard.

That might explain why vendors fabricate engagement statistics, starting with how they define "engagement." They conflate engagement with three things in particular:

- Participation
- the collection of incentives, and
- the availability of free resources previously paid for.

I: DEFINING "ENGAGEMENT"
Participation by itself is not engagement

Just completing a task – and this is true whether the task is wellness-related or work-related in general – doesn't mean someone is engaged in it.

For example, wellness promoter Ron Goetzel published an extensive study in Health Affairs candidly demonstrating that, on risk assessments, roughly two-thirds of smokers deny smoking. Clearly, that two-thirds is not engaged in the completion of that assessment, or they would have completed it honestly, to learn their own risk. (It's also likely that some of the remaining third were also unengaged, but were simply being honest or concerned they might get caught.)

While this study, tallying 373,478 completed risk assessments, would be definitive by itself, it was confirmed by an award-winning study from Wellsteps. That study of 3269 Boise residents, summarized below, found that only 2% (77) admitted to smoking. Even that 2% understated how often (4.27 days a week). By contrast, the national smoking rate is 15%. And mostly 7 days a week, of course.

Lying is not just limited to smoking. 70% of the adult population drinks, though slightly lower in Idaho. Yet, in this Wellsteps study, only 21% admitted to it. Wellsteps' data would support the observation that wellness programs aim to create a culture of health but end up creating a culture of deceit.

One could also note that calling the consumption of 1.1 drinks a week – a level that the National Institutes of Health calls "low-risk drinking -- a "worst health behavior" encourages casual drinkers to disengage from the wellness program.

Table 2. Improvements in Health Behaviors Among Those With the Worst Health Behaviors

Health Behavior	Baseline	Year 1	Year 2*
<2 days of exercise/week, n=502	1.46 days	2.29 days	2.47 days **(+69%)**
<60 minutes/week, n=373	18.79 min	113.20 min	134.71 min **(+617%)**
<3 daily servings fruits/veggies, n=426	2.46 servings	3.48 servings	3.63 servings **(+47%)**
<3 days of restful sleep/week, n=407	2.23 days	3.17 days	3.36 days **(+51%)**
Smokers (days per week, n=77)**	4.35 days	5.43 days	4.27 days **(-1.6%)**
Alcohol Use (drinks/day, n=691)	1.31 drinks	1.16 drinks	1.10 drinks **(-16%)**

Collecting incentives is not engagement

If you see a number like "84% of our employees were engaged in the program," that almost always means "84% of employees saw $1000 on the line and didn't want to lose it." Not "84% of employees were really looking forward to having their employer draw their blood and play doctor with them."

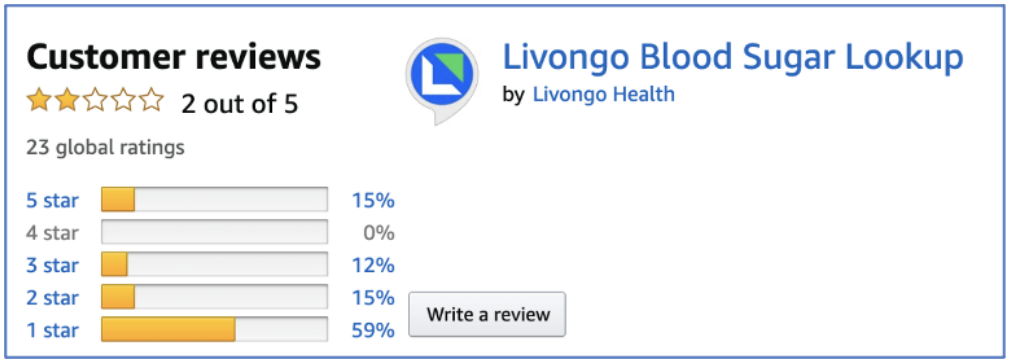
Put another way, why do you think that (before the EEOC took incentives off the table for clinical programs), the average large employer incentive/penalty pre-pandemic was $757? If employees truly wanted to be screened, they wouldn't need massive bribes or fines, right?

Giving away free stuff is not engagement in the program

The diabetes equivalent of incentives is making glucose strips and diabetes medication free. Livongo says as much: "A big draw for employees is that everything is free." So one might ask: "Is the engagement due to the employer paying for all the meters and strips, or it is the other elements of the program that the employer is paying for?"

Put another way, how many employees would sign up for the program if the strips weren't free?

Perhaps an answer can be found on Amazon. Amazon reviews, which include un-engaged unengaged employees, give a much different story than Livongo self-reports:



As one reviewer said: "The only reason I'm using this meter is because the test strips are free."

The sole 5-star review said: "Who can beat free?"

As for the program itself, apparently one of the diabetes education tips is: "Did you know that not getting enough sleep can make you cranky and out of sorts?" Engaging? You make the call.

Now that we've distinguished true engagement from all the expansive versions of it, the remainder of Part Six will show how not to, and then how to, measure it. [Spoiler Alert: There is only one valid way to do it.]

II: MEASURING ENGAGEMENT

How not to measure engagement

In addition to conflating engagement with participation and the desire to collect incentives and get things free, wellness vendors measure engagement by observing people who already have good health habits, rather than engage and observe people whose health habits need improving. Do these participants in a "successful" wellness program really look like they were just about to have a heart attack if they hadn't joined the program?

And where is the rest of the organization in this picture? The non-participants and dropouts? How come no one is measuring them?

Likewise, the National Bureau of Economic Research concluded that observing only active participants yielded a much different result than randomized control trials (RCTs) capturing everyone:

> Findings from the Illinois Workplace Wellness Study and the BJ's Wholesale Club study, both RCTs, differ from... prior studies that found that wellness programs improve employee health and reduce medical use... These prior studies used observational research designs, which can result in significant selection bias even after controlling for many covariates.

So what does measure engagement?

Ideally, an engagement measure would:

1. Survey unengaged employees as well as engaged employees (like Amazon reviews did)
2. Measure each program on both an absolute basis as well as relative to one another
3. Adjust for the engagement level as a whole within an organization
4. Compare the engagement to the cost. Obviously higher-cost programs should be getting more engagement.
5. Compare your total employee engagement to other organizations.

A tool checking the first four boxes exists…and it's free. It's called the Benefits Engagement Survey Tool (BEST) and it can be downloaded right here. Of course, there is a bit of a catch to "free." While you could do the analysis on your own, if you sign up with VI to assist you at least the first time, you'll find it is much easier. Further, we offer comparisons to other organizations using BEST.

Here's how BEST works, as you can see in the video description.

First, you decide what programs you are going to measure. In this example, a city in Arizona measured five: health literacy training, the EAP, the risk assessment, the member portal, and screening.

Second, you estimate the cost of each. In this case, the risk assessment and the screening were combined into a single fee, so the City split them out intuitively. You will need price information to achieve #4 above.

Third, you send this simple 3-question survey to employees. It is one short page per benefit measured. (There is also an open comments field, not shown here.)

How many times did you use the Benefit?

- Never
- One Time
- Two Times
- Three Times
- Four Times
- Five or More

How useful was the Benefit to you?

- Very Useful
- Somewhat Useful
- Not Very Useful
- Not Useful at All

Do you feel that our offering this benefit enhances/reflects a positive corporate culture?

- It detracts from my view
- Neutral/No Opinion or Not Familiar with Benefit
- Slightly Positive
- Positive
- Very Positive

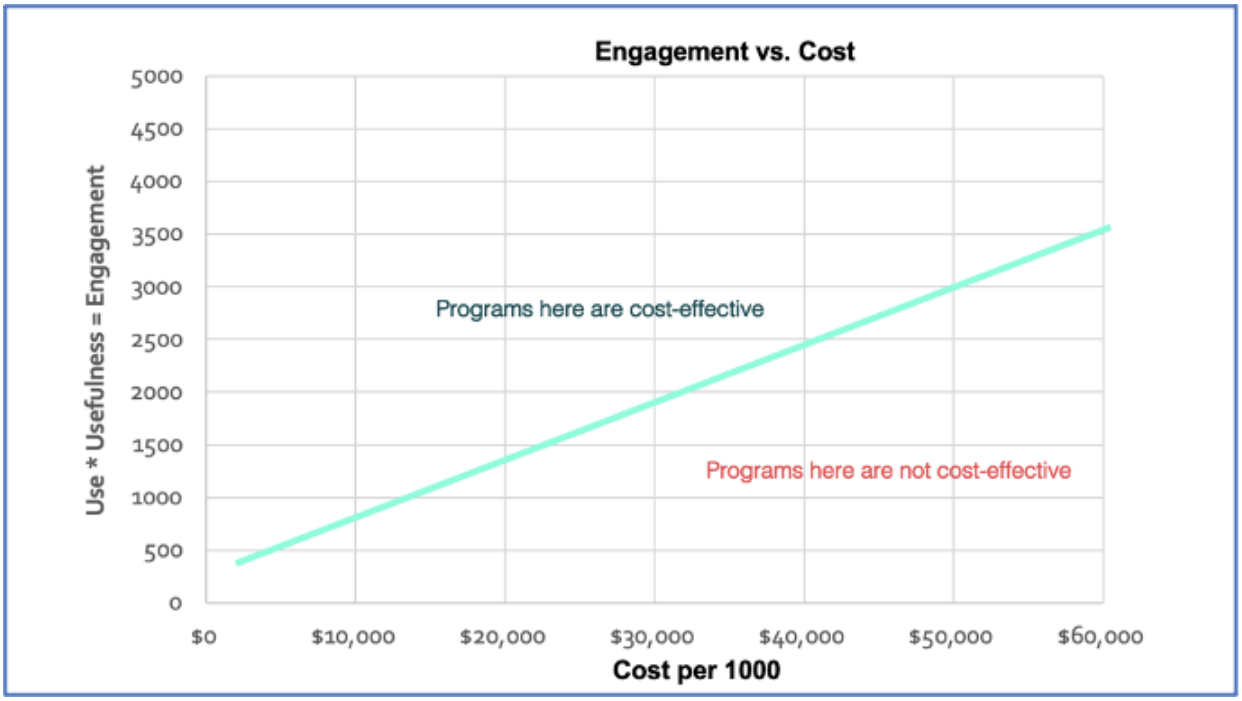
You can survey some or all employees. The key is not to survey users specifically of any given offering. So you wouldn't, for example, attach this survey to the end of a risk assessment, because that would bias the responses in favor of use of the risk assessment. You wouldn't be finding the non-users.

In addition to not pre-selecting the employees to survey, the other key to BEST's validity is that you are asking the exact same questions of the exact same employees.

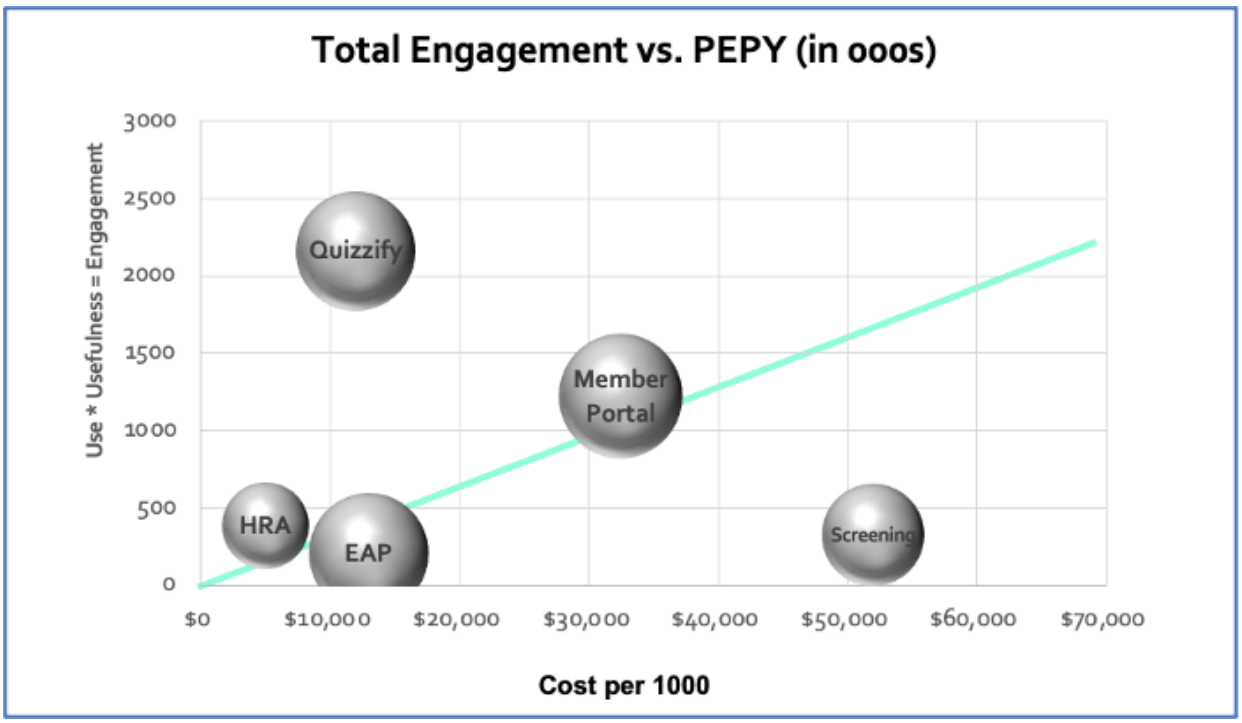
"Engagement" is then quite easy to measure: Assign a numerical score to each rating in the first two questions – number of uses and usefulness -- and then multiply those ratings to get the engagement score. An offering that is used frequently and that people find useful scores the highest.

Finally, the third question asks whether this benefit "enhances or reflects a positive corporate culture." This question captures things like fertility benefits or catastrophic care. These would be seldom-used benefits, but ones that make employees feel like your organization cares for them.

Now that you have the three questions tallied, and the price of each offering, you will be able to array them on a bubble chart like this one:



As noted on the chart, you're going to be looking for "above the line" programs, whose engagement score is quite high relative to the cost. Question #3 about the corporate culture will be tallied by the size of the bubble. Putting all three questions and the cost together might yield you something like this:



Earlier we mentioned that the ideal engagement measurement tool would yield insights into five measures, but that BEST could do only four. Here is the one thing BEST cannot do. While it uniquely measures your programs against one another, revealing the relative engagement of each, BEST does not measure the absolute engagement of employees in your organization vs. others. We can do that in an ersatz way by comparing overall scores across organizations, but that will be a crude measure at best. (And we charge for it.)

Nonetheless, four out of five ain't bad, and we urge you to download the BEST tool and start using it. While we do charge for assistance, we charge much less if you are willing to share your data with us to build out our database (de-identified, of course).

And please send us examples that do not involve Quizzify. Otherwise, Quizzify always seems to win. They even guarantee that. We would be interested in seeing some surveys where Quizzify's high relative score doesn't cause all the other scores to be on or below the midline that we will provide our analysis assistance at no cost, through July.