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CHANGING MINDS ON HEALTHY SNACKS



LOCAL FRANCHISE WORKS TO PERSUADE EMPLOYERS, SCHOOL

Instead of a revolt, Missoula YMCA associate executive director Jason Shearer noticed an increase of apple cores and juice boxes in the facility's trash cans after its traditional vending machines were replaced with a newer, healthier setup.

The YMCA brought in Sarah Tarka and Alex Baer to help change the snack options there.

The Baers are Human Healthy Vending operators in Missoula and sell only healthy options – including items like fresh fruit and Greek yogurt – in their machines around the city.

"We're trying to make nutritional snacks more easily available," Sarah said. "We want to make it easy to eat healthy."

Missoula Healthy Vending machines don't have candy or soda, and aren't just big metal boxes with coin slots, Alex said.

Instead, the machines are refrigerated, have a lift that safely catches, then vends options like fresh fruit and yogurt inside. The machines have credit card swipe payment options and include interactive screens that help educate customers about the options.

At the YMCA, there was some hesitation about ditching the old vending machine, Shearer said. But attempts to put the traditional vending machine in a less convenient spot, or include both healthy and less healthy snacks inside the machines wasn't effective in helping Y members make healthier decisions.

When kids first gathered in front of the Missoula Healthy Vending machine, they were slightly baffled by the options, Shearer said.

"Then one kid just said, 'What are you going to eat?'" Shearer said. "If a vending machine has a Snickers (candy bar) and an apple, the kids will buy the Snickers. If it has a orange and apple, maybe they'll buy the apple."

The Y sold more than 100 apples since the machine was installed in June. Parents have stopped Shearer and the Baers to thank them for having the healthy options available.

The Baers have seen similar acceptance and even excitement about the machines in other places, like Bonner School.

"A big thing for kids is in every location we partner with, we do a sample day. They can try it and we can tell them why they're healthier and maybe why they want to swap out Cheetos (chips) for something healthier," Sarah said.

The Baers are former college athletes who met at the University of Montana.

Part of the motivation to bring Human vending machines to Missoula was to ensure their 16-month-old son is surrounded by healthy options as he gets older.

To be successful, Alex said, the options must all be healthy and the effort must include an educational element.

"People are looking for solutions," Sarah said. "Getting more active is one part of it, but so is nutrition. This is our way of doing our part locally for a national problem."

The good news is the snacks that fit into the healthy label are expanding. The food tastes better and there are more options, Sarah said.

Along with including options like fresh fruit, the machines include popcorn, whole grain chocolate chip cookies and milk.

Each machine can be filled with a custom set of snacks, Alex said.

All snacks meet new government guidelines that define "healthy" snacks for schools.

As trends and federal guidelines change, the healthy vending industry is poised for growth.

In 2014, most schools in the U.S., including Missoula County Public Schools, will be mandated under U.S. Department of Agriculture guidelines to offer only a new set of healthier snacks for students.

As a part of the 2010 Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act, all "competitive foods" sold a la carte or in vending machines must meet a host of requirements.

Snacks cannot have more than 200 calories and have no more than 35 sugar by weight.

Schools can sell water, milk and 100 percent juice options, but not soda or regular calorie sports drinks.

Missoula County Public Schools has already begun making changes to meet the guidelines, MCPS Food Services Director Stacey Rossmiller said.

"For example, at the middle schools on Tuesdays and Thursdays, they'll bring in pizza from a local pizza store and we had to switch to whole grain crust. Cup of noodles, we took those off, they're too high in sodium," Rossmiller said.

The rest of the changes will be implemented throughout the year.

The Baers want to get Missoula Healthy Vending into more schools.

"Our big focus now is schools," Alex said. "I think that's the biggest chance to have the biggest impact."

The Human company trains its representatives on all the USDA guidelines and can help administrators with compliance, Sarah said.

Each MCPS principal makes the decision whether to install vending machines, Rossmiller said.

"Personally I would like to see it," she said.

The Baers think the reaction from students – and parents – that could use the vending machines at school will be similar to that in place the enthusiastic reception the Missoula Healthy Vending machine received at the YMCA.

"People love it," Alex said. "They're thrilled."

