WELCOA's 2012 Premier Provider Network

An Expert Interview With extracon science

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ABOUT JESSE HERCULES, JD, BSIE

Jesse Hercules is the President of Extracon Science, a leading health promotion company using technology to bring engagement to wellness programs. Mr. Hercules has led the team at Extracon since 2007. Mr. Hercules is a frequent speaker and writer on health promotion topics, including two years of service on the HERO Think Tank for the Health Enhancement Research Organization.

Before entering the wellness field, Mr. Hercules held technology leadership positions at General Electric and at Waterstone Consulting. Mr. Hercules was educated at Northwestern University, earning a degree in Industrial Engineering with a second major in Economics. He then graduated summa cum laude from the University Of Mississippi School Of Law. He is a licensed Tennessee attorney, a licensed Patent and Trademark attorney, and a licensed multi-engine commercial airplane pilot. He lives in Memphis, Tennessee.

ABOUT DAVID HUNNICUTT

Since his arrival at WELCOA in 1995, David Hunnicutt has interviewed hundreds of the most influential business and health leaders in America. Known for his ability to make complex issues easier to understand, David has a proven track record of asking the right questions and getting straight answers. As a result of his efforts, David’s expert interviews have been widely-published and read by workplace wellness practitioners across the country.

David Hunnicutt can be reached at dhunnicutt@welcoa.org.
For more than 20 years, the Wellness Council of America has been dedicated to providing its members with the very best tools and resources to help them build and sustain results-oriented wellness programs. As part of this mission, we feature a network of Premier Providers to help familiarize health promotion practitioners with the increasing array of products and services available to them. In this Premier Provider Interview with Jesse Hercules, you’ll find in-depth information about his company, Extracon Science, an industry leader in engagement and wellness technology.

The PPN Interview series is designed to give you a better understanding of each Premier Provider’s background, philosophy, products and services. We hope that you find this resource useful in understanding how Extracon Science can best complement and help strengthen your employee wellness initiatives.

David Hunnicutt: Tell us about Extracon Science and how the company got its start. What’s been your role in the development of the organization?

Jesse Hercules: I’ve always had a personal interest in how technology can drive health behavior change. Starting in 2004 (before Facebook was popular, long before the iPhone and just at the start of the text message boom) I was spending evenings and weekends designing and building interactive phone-based systems to help participants improve health habits. I was awarded two patents for these systems and later, I became familiar with the NIH-funded research systems using mobile technology for health behavior change.

In 2007, I started Extracon and quickly hired a team of software developers. We launched our first offerings that fall, which were aimed at the consumer health and fitness market. We had extensive press coverage, and were talked about on NBC’s Today Show and written about in Prevention magazine and Good Housekeeping. But we soon discovered that worksite wellness was the right market for us. It was the one place where measurable results mattered more than marketing dollars. During this transition period, we were able to license several of the best research-based systems from academia and adapted our systems to take the best aspects of onsite programs and turn them into engaging online and mobile wellness programs.
DH: What are the core components and services that make up Extracon Science?

JH: We provide a turnkey platform for wellness programs that can engage a large slice of your company’s employee population in practicing healthy behaviors on a daily basis and influencing others in a health-positive direction. Some clients use our whole platform— including a Health Assessment, Individual Programs, Challenge programs, and Incentives. Other clients just use our Healthy Challenge programs along with their existing wellness initiatives.

The Healthy Challenge programs drive engagement in areas like physical activity, weight management, nutrition, stress and sleep. Our customers typically run a challenge every quarter, with a length of 6 to 8 weeks each. Participants enroll and form teams online. They can report their progress via the web, using our iPhone and Android apps, or even by uploading from devices like the FitBit. Teams compete and compare progress on a real-time leader-board. Participants can use our social features to “friend” each other to compare progress and offer support.

“...we provide a turnkey platform for wellness programs that can engage a large slice of your company’s employee population in practicing healthy behaviors on a daily basis.”
For our largest clients, we often create a customized set of Challenge programs to meet their unique needs and coordinate with onsite vendors for rollout. For our smaller clients, we can provide the planning and program management services that they don’t have the resources to do internally. And regardless of size, we support all our employer clients and their participants via phone and email.

“Extracon’s programs are comprehensive and include dozens of educational and promotional materials that are ready for you to use.”

DH: What makes Extracon’s programs unique and different?

JH: What makes us different is our focus on building engagement and driving culture change. We can cover the bases with HRA’s, biometrics, and incentive dashboards. But it’s our Healthy Challenge programs that are team-based, social and highly visible within your organization – that’s what will help you change the culture. When your participants start practicing healthy habits every day, along with their friends and co-workers, you’ve made healthy behavior visible in a way that changes culture.

The Healthy Challenge programs are also engaging in a very measurable way. Participants often log 50, 60, or 100 instances of healthy behavior within each of our programs. Those are measurable units of engagement!

If you measure engagement in this way, you can quickly see the impact of the Healthy Challenge programs.
DH: What kinds of companies and/or organizations are a perfect fit for the services provided by Extracon Science?

JH: Our most successful clients have been organizations that had wellness initiatives in place, but were looking for that spark to create engagement and start building a culture of health. We’ve worked with employers from 200 to over 20,000 and everything in between.

Our smaller employer clients are looking for a wellness platform that’s complete and easy to roll out. They want one website to give participants a clear path from start to finish—from HRA’s to programs to incentives. Our platform can turn their existing initiatives into a complete wellness program.

Our large-employer clients come to us for our Healthy Challenge programs—which are scalable to serve thousands of participants, and include reporting and communication tools to let them administer a single program across dozens of worksites. We often develop custom Challenge programs for larger clients, and we work with their existing vendors who administer onsite services, incentives, and technology.

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Our mobile apps let us reach participants who don’t use a computer every day, so it’s no problem if you have a workforce where some are tech-savvy and others are not.”
DH: Can you provide some examples of companies and/or organizations that have utilized your services and what kind of results they have experienced?

JH: We’ve worked with employers like Costco, Red Bull, University of Phoenix, and bebe stores. We’ve also worked with quite a few hospitals and health care systems. The most common result has been increased participation compared to the homegrown programs these companies had been running before. Our typical client will see about 30% participation in a walking or physical activity challenge, and will pick up an additional 20% during the rest of the year by adding challenges in areas such as weight and nutrition.

During each challenge, the average participant has 65 touch-points with our program. That means they are taking positive action for their health, such as walking, or eating fruits and vegetables and then logging it on our system 65 times over the course of several weeks. We think that’s the measure of true engagement: when participants take daily actions to improve their health over a long enough period of time to help them build a new habit.

DH: How important is communication in the Extracon process?

JH: Communication is definitely a key to engagement. Our clients use a set of more than 300 templates that they can load, edit, and email through our platform. These templates are designed to help drive program registration, educate participants, and sustain engagement in programs. The platform includes a scheduler, so you can create the emails ahead of time and they will go out to the right participants at the right time. We also have PDF posters for each program that clients can type into, then print and post onsite to drive participation.
DH: How do incentives fit into the Extracon process, and what can an employer or practitioner expect to use and/or spend for these incentives?

JH: Our clients are using incentives in a wide variety of ways and dollar amounts—from gift cards and prize drawings to health plan premium reductions. Our goal is to have real-time reports and dashboards to keep the employer and the participants on the same page about who has earned each incentive.

For Healthy Challenge programs, we’ve found that if the program is well-designed and promoted, then incentives can be modest. An inexpensive kick-off giveaway like a wristband or water bottle can show employer support for the program, and give participants a way to “signal” to others that they are in the game. At the end of a challenge, you should offer everyone who has successfully completed the challenge a chance to win a drawing for some desirable incentive. With this structure, for just a few dollars per person you can really build program engagement.

DH: How does Extracon track and manage participant data to help clients view participants’ progress and incent the right participants at the right time?

JH: Participants report their baseline data in the Extracon system when they first sign up. So, as a baseline, we find out how physically active they are, how many fruits and veggies they eat, or their baseline data relating to whatever challenge they are doing. Then during the challenge, they log their actual progress several times a week.

Extracon’s reporting system lets the employer set their own program goals—whether that’s having participants eat five fruits and veggies or doing 150 minutes of exercise per week—and then, we’re able to tell you which of your participants met those criteria versus didn’t reach the goals. The important thing is that we don’t do a winner-takes-all approach because if you give a huge incentive to the team that walks the most on a self-report basis, people will start to question the truthfulness of the self-reported data. Our method is to help employers set goals, and then enter everyone who meets that goal for all weeks of the challenge into a drawing for the final incentive.
DH: With the Extracon program, what’s the first year benchmark for participation that an employer might expect?

JH: This number can vary based on what’s typical for a particular industry or what’s been typical for that particular workplace in the past. It can also vary by how much the program is supported by the senior leadership or promoted through communication and other engagement strategies—and you have to look at all of those things.

Participation in a one-time, heavily incented task like an HRA can top 80%. Programs that require sustained commitment, like our Healthy Challenge programs, have participation rates in the 30% to 50% range per year. We like to say that you can buy participation in one-time tasks like an HRA, but you have to earn engagement in multi-week programs.

DH: Let’s say an employer did reach 50% within the first year—which is a good number—what kind of percentage increases could they then expect working with Extracon in years two, three and beyond?

JH: Extracon has been expanding its product line and doing more of these programs, so we have pretty good data to show this growth. Our numbers are showing that if your company did a walking or physical activity challenge with us in year one and got 30% and then added other challenges in year two, your program could move from 30% up to 50%. It is really hard without strong incentives to get much above 50%. We’ve found that by emphasizing personal success stories, especially testimonials from people at your worksite, we can keep the momentum going from program to program, year to year.
DH: In your experience, what is the number of challenges that fits into an ideal range for an employer to implement every year?

JH: There are definitely the right number of programs and the right program length to keep in mind. Something that we have seen work well is to do one challenge per quarter, for a length of six to eight weeks each. Another approach some of our clients take is six challenges per year, but for only 30 days apiece. We don’t think there is any benefit to doing more than that. And frankly, quarterly timing is the most popular. When you think about lining up all those things that you need to run a great program—sending the communications out ahead of time, getting the top leadership engagement piece that is key, developing teams and other engagement strategies—it’s very difficult to do that effectively more than a few times per year.

DH: You have had a lot of valuable experience in working with employers and helping them to build capacity so that they can deliver these programs. From your experience, what are the two or three most important pieces of advice that you would give to practitioners when it comes to these kinds of initiatives?

JH: The most important piece of advice that I usually give to practitioners is that having a great wellness program is not about getting people to do something once or twice a year, but rather having a big, critical mass of people doing healthy things together on an almost daily basis. This is really what builds a culture of health. My first advice to practitioners is to get oriented around those metrics and build frequent engagement.

The second thing I usually tell people is not to be surprised at how much energy is going to come into your office when you get 30 or 40% of your people participating. There will be so many questions about what counts and what doesn’t count: “Is a tomato a fruit or a vegetable?” You will be astonished at how much more activity comes into your office when you are running engaging programs as opposed to when you are just running paper-programs that have people checking a box. You have to be ready in terms of clearing out your schedule and making time to interact with employees because that’s part of engagement. And it will surprise you—but it is worth it. Although this type of programming creates more work, it helps establish more significant relationships and brings about tremendous opportunity for the health of an organization. And we hope more and more employers are willing to commit to being engaged.
I think it’s also important to look at the sustainability of your program and make sure that whatever you are planning is something that is going to work not just one year, but for several years in a row and for several years down the road. Lay out your plan for what you want your program to look like in three to five years and then consistently add the pieces until you get there.

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DH: What is the best way for companies to learn more about your organization?

JH: I would encourage anyone to visit our website at www.exracon.com for a great overview of what we do. You can download our whitepapers, watch a quick video and download one-page summaries of each Challenge. That’s also where you can request a date and time for a live phone consultation with one of our health promotion experts.

During the consultation, we will learn about your unique wellness program and how we can help you achieve your goals. We will use screen-sharing to give you a demo of our platform and its features. Finally, we’ll send you a tailored proposal for how we can help your wellness program develop true engagement. We’re always available by phone at 901-405-1914 or via email at sales@extracon.com.

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