

# Employee Purchase Program Seen as Key Component of WellStar Health System's Caring Culture

By BRUCE SHUTAN



**Between an intensely competitive industry that's chasing the same highly skilled talent and a challenging economy for working Americans who struggle with credit problems, WellStar Health System in Marietta, Ga., has been an ideal candidate for a program that makes it possible for employees to budget for computers, electronics, household appliances and furniture.**



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More than 11,000 physicians, nurses, medical technicians, radiologists, nutritionists, clerks and laundry service staffers are offered these products through Purchasing Power's convenient payroll-deduction arrangement since the fall of 2008.

"What has really been great over the course of the year is that it has settled into a pretty regular pattern of employees accessing not only laptop computers, but also other things like GPS units, cameras and household appliances," reports Karen Mathews, WellStar's director of work-life services.

WellStar employees are able to make purchases online or over the telephone year-round and not wait for open enrollment, which, along with back-to-school and springtime promotions, is used more as a means of seasonal and new-product marketing campaigns spread throughout the year.

## Return Customers

One significant measure of success is that 73.2% of employees are return customers, according to Mathews, who describes the Purchasing Power program as one component of a robust benefits package and caring culture that recognizes the importance of work-life balance.

Participation among WellStar employees averages 18.2%, which compares with 5% to 10% across Purchasing Power's book of business. The organization receives monthly reports to track those numbers and quarterly employee-satisfaction surveys, which provides feedback to help refresh promotion and marketing campaigns.

The most popular products include laptop and desktop computers, as well as accessories for those items such as printers and virus-protection software. Consumer electronics are another hot-selling category.

Most of the orders come from females, which may not be as surprising considering that women dominate the nursing field and have a strong presence as medical imaging technicians, radiology, nutritional services, housekeeping and administration.

"We've noticed that health care systems as a whole are very active with programs such as these because they have such a wide array of employees and departments," observes Michelle Jones, WellStar's account manager at Purchasing Power.

She says WellStar's corporate culture makes the organization a huge proponent of success both at work and home, which is reflected in employee testimonials. One person recently wrote: "This is a wonderfully innovative program, and I really love the

option of payroll deduction, which made my much-needed laptop purchase possible." Another employee noted that "programs like this make life easier on people like myself who strive for the better," while another colleague was pleasantly surprised that an order placed on a Sunday night was received the following Tuesday.

Offering the program on an employee-pay-all voluntary basis enables WellStar to help control benefit costs while also offering valuable purchasing opportunities to help attract and retain talent at a time of high anxiety across the workplace. According to MetLife's eighth annual Employee Benefits Trends Study, 68% of employees felt increased feelings of job insecurity, distractions at work because of financial worries, or a heavier workload during the past year.

## Budgeting Tool

Since Purchasing Power's program is based on employment status, job tenure and annual salary rather than an individual's credit score, many workers have an opportunity to buy something that they otherwise would not have been able to acquire.

That means WellStar is offering this segment of its workforce "a responsible way to buy important name-brand products for themselves or their families when cash or credit isn't an option," Jones explains. "By using payroll deduction, employees can make manageable payments over 12 months, but receive their products right away. Some people like to think of the program as a budgeting tool. In a nutshell, offering a program like Purchasing Power speaks volumes about how a company cares about the well-being of their employees."

Mathews was relieved to learn the program wouldn't require any heavy lifting and allow her to focus on strategic issues within the organization. Indeed, Purchasing Power handles everything from start to finish, including employee eligibility reviews, purchasing, shipping, payments, program communication and customer service. Another selling point of the program is that there are no implementation or participation fees, nor is the employer liable for any of the unpaid purchases.

"The experience with Purchasing Power for me, and leadership of this organization, has been great," Mathews says. "Anytime you implement a program like Purchasing Power you always have a fear of how much it's going to require of you to manage on a day-to-day basis the logistical aspects of the program. The staff of Purchasing Power has been beyond phenomenal managing any issues that arise in a very quick turnaround time." ■

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