Your Recipe for a Delectable Security Awareness Program

Security awareness programs can sometimes seem about as enticing as three-day leftovers, but, when prepared the right way, those leftovers can turn into a gourmet meal, complete with appetizer and dessert.

Creating something that appeals to people across diverse roles, geography and generations has its challenges. Having one set menu that satisfies everyone does not always work. By knowing your people and preparing security elements that feed them what they need, they will feel strengthened and satiated.

Many security awareness programs contain a dash of policy, a pinch of technology and a handful of education — the beginnings of a successful recipe. What programs often miss are a few core ingredients and special seasonings that take a meal from edible to delectable. To bring about a change in behavior, make people the core ingredient, and then steep the program in our secret sauce: a blend of sponsorship, coalitions, relevance, metrics, media, marketing and perspective.

Sponsorship
The role of the sponsor is to clarify (separate and remove the lumps) why this program is essential. This message should come from someone influential at the highest level of the firm. When awareness programs are sponsored by C-level leadership who are active and visible, they are more successful in bringing about meaningful changes in behavior. It is important that your security program is viewed as a business initiative.

Coalitions
By emulsifying (mixing two or more items together that do not usually combine), we enhance the overall program and create something more flavorful. Elements of compliance often overlap, so building strong relationships between the technology, marketing, knowledge management, human resources and professional development departments is a critical step in preparing a succulent security awareness program. When developing the “what is in it for me?” message, coalition members on change teams are instrumental in managing the people side of change.
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Relevance
When you dice (cut into small cubes of uniform size and shape) foods, each spoonful becomes tastier. Identify the top 10 security awareness topics to be addressed throughout the year. Be flexible: evaluate the direction of your security program quarterly to ensure it is on point, and leave room to address new issues that surface. Because this is a program rather than a project, it is important to circle back to topics when deemed necessary.

“Keep it simple, keep it fresh.” — Emeril

Metrics
Forget to set your stove or oven to the proper heat level, and your dish will not cook properly. Let the data tell the story and incorporate quantitative and qualitative measurements along the way. Well-defined metrics drive performance and provide focus. Define success and identify what and when to measure to know when success has been achieved; you will derive the most benefit from metrics if you keep them simple. Remember to get a baseline measurement to help you see the growth. Socializing what success looks like and the milestones achieved keeps a program sizzling hot. This approach allows project teams to determine whether learning is happening, if behavior is changing and if goals are being met.

“Take risks and you’ll get the payoffs. Learn from your mistakes until you succeed.” — Bobby Flay

Media
Vary the menu. Serve up learning elements that appeal to all the senses. Meatloaf Mondays can either be comforting or boring. Programs that incorporate a mixture of modalities see increased responsiveness and success. For example, an elearning video designed to be consumed as a single-serving for an individual could also be dished up family-style and watched by a practice group in a team meeting. Also, some people are satisfied with a 3-minute executive summary appetizer, while others may need the 10-minute detailed entree. Consider these approaches along with in-person and virtual sessions to liven up your security menu.

Marketing
Creative and thoughtful plating enhances a dish. Successful programs leverage marketing techniques to serve up content in a palatable way — e.g., posters, commercials, blogs, phishing simulations, newsletters. The right size plate lets food stand out, so have a focal point, and avoid overcrowding the ingredients. Like a side dish, commercials and posters play a supporting role in the meal. Any additional garnishes should be placed purposefully and both complement and enhance the main course.

Positive Perspective
Remember that a good diet encourages you to eat well rather than spotlight poor choices. Focus on “how to” safe behaviors rather than “do not do” risky behaviors. Zeroing in on what you cannot eat only increases the cravings and feelings of deprivation, so, instead of telling people they cannot connect to Wi-Fi outside the office, teach them how to do it safely.

Incentives
It is always good to have the sweet treat of dessert to look forward to at the end of the meal. Catch people doing things right and reward them accordingly. Encourage people to report phishing emails, lock their computers and use shredders, then implement a point system or other competitive aspect to the program. This should entice even the finickiest of eaters.

Remember that policies, technologies and training without behavioral change will not strengthen your security posture. By blending the right mix of ingredients and adding our special sauce, you will be able to serve up a delectable security awareness program that yields good security behaviors and maximizes your return on investment in information security.

Marinating vs. Blanching: Which Is Better for Adoption?
When it comes to people adopting any new program, we can turn to the world of cooking for inspiration.

Marinating is the cooking process of soaking foods in a seasoned liquid before cooking, which flavors foods and tenderizes tougher cuts of meat. In blanching, a vegetable or fruit is scalded in boiling water, removed after a brief, timed interval, and plunged into iced water or placed under cold running water to halt the cooking process. Food is blanched to soften or to cook it.

Some might view blanching as refreshing, but others would find it shocking. While short bursts of security awareness training can be effective in the moment, the long marinade will allow people to soak up all the flavors you are serving up for lasting results.

“Cooking well doesn’t mean cooking fancy.” — Julia Child