



A \$200 vibrator, confessionals from the Catholic Church and why wellness' greatest profits are yet to come

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CLEVELAND, Ohio — Michael Feuer found a path to wellness in the Catholic Church. And he's Jewish.

The founder of [OfficeMax](#) was in Rome touring Vatican City when he satisfied a longtime curiosity and went into a nearby church, slipped into a booth and went through the rite of confession.



“I did it in a respectful manner,” said Feuer, who often spent nights strolling through retail stores watching customers to get ideas for OfficeMax. “I wanted to confess and see what it was like. I really was fascinated.”

A secular version of confessionals will be part of Feuer's new venture: [Max-Wellness](#). The stores will be one part superstore and one part high-end boutique, with items covering topics from vitamin supplements to sexual health. In the middle of his stores will be confessional-styled “cones of silence,” where people will reveal intimate questions about their own health (to a computer instead of a Catholic priest), and will receive advice on products and lifestyle options especially for them.

Feuer's enterprise is another big bet on the profit potential of wellness. Companies today offer blood tests, wireless devices, wellness-styled pharmacies, incentive-based wellness programs for employees of clients, and a myriad of other services hoping to cash in on the desire to keep people healthy rather than heal (and pay for) their illnesses.

“Some people argue it's not fashionable enough yet,” said Margaret Moore, co-founder of the [WellCoach Corp.](#) and director of the [Institute of Coaching](#) at Harvard University's [McLean Hospital](#). “We do need to start a movement where that kind of thing can get going. All these efforts are going to help.”

Wellness revealed its high-profit potential about two years ago. Companies like Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and Kraft Foods started buying vitamin-water and health-bar companies.

It's continued to evolve since then. Colorado's [Pharmaca](#), which combines traditional pharmacy with wellness services, last month raised almost \$7 million and was named this year's Pharmacy Chain of the Year by the trade magazine Drug Topics. Midwest companies like [Allostatix](#) (wellness blood test); [Engagement Health](#) (corporate wellness) and [Red Brick Health](#) (corporate wellness) have raised or are raising capital. [Cleveland Clinic](#) soon plans to launch its own brand of [wellness services](#).

It likely will be easier to buy into wellness. Ohio legislators, for example, are reviewing a bill to form a task force to consider [business tax incentives for wellness](#).

Feuer thinks now is the time. His company recently took an additional \$2.5 million in private investment, which will help launch four Max-Wellness stores by January. Two stores will open in the Cleveland area — including a locale in the tony shopping complex [Crocker Park](#) — and one each will open in Sarasota and Naples, Florida. He plans to open between four and 10 more in 2010, and continue a regional OfficeMax-style roll out after that.

Max-Wellness hopes to be a destination for everything health, wellness and then some. All 6,000-plus products in the stores will fit under the corporate catch phrase “answers for health living.”



Michael Feuer

Feuer breaks the stores down further into three categories: pleasure, prevention and treatment. There will be *attractive* displays selling durable medical goods like bed pans and crutches (Feuer said most of these shops are “dirty-windowed stores”); high-end supplements that won't compete with drug stores' mainstays (there won't be a pharmacy at Max-Wellness); and a sexual health section that sells, among other things, \$200 vibrators.

Now you understand the need for the privacy booths. But Feuer, who has a knack for borrowing and expanding concepts that work, takes it further than to just confessionals. The computers customers use include proprietary software from a Silicon Valley company — “it's WebMD on steroids,” Feuer said.

Plus, customers gain further anonymity with the option to place personal products immediately into plain white bags that are scanned at checkout — an idea he adapted from the plastic bags used at grocery stores' produce sections. Wellness is more than sweatbands and Ginseng, and Feuer said many businesses fail to realize the personal nature of what they're trying to sell (think obesity to incontinence).

“It's about treating customers with dignity and sensitivity,” he said.

By their own inaction, some health systems have enabled entrepreneurs to slip in and fill the wellness void. [Dr. Jason Hwang](#), executive director of health care at the [Innosight Institute](#), said wellness customers are “still not on the radar screen of most hospital systems.”

He compares issues over wellness to the indecisiveness health professional had over whether to engage in alternative medicine. “There are a whole bunch of organizations that are related to wellness, and the health-care industry has never embraced them as part of their delivery system,” Hwang said.

Feuer, who is on the board of Cleveland’s [University Hospitals](#), thinks hospitals will be more likely to partner with private companies to win revenue from wellness. “Retailing 101 has never been done in health care,” he said. “Enterprise and entrepreneurship are not the strong suits of hospitals.”

But brace for a wellness backlash. Not all these businesses will pan out, and there’s always been a question of whether wellness companies can snag the unhealthy who really need their services. Many wellness companies justify their market potential by citing obesity rates, but they end up capturing as customers only healthy people and the so-called “worried well” who fear poor health even though they’re far from it.

Big companies, in particular, may sour on outsourced wellness operations that are meant to cut health-care costs but don’t deliver, said Mike Miele, the president of health care analytics at [Gallagher Benefit Services](#). Miele thinks many of these wellness companies are over-promising when they claim a rapid return on investment through their programs. He points to some research that shows results are overblown because [only the healthiest workers participate](#).

“Everyone jumping on the bandwagon without any proven results,” he said.

Miele also thinks few, if any, wellness companies will succeed if their client companies actively promote and participate in wellness practices. “Where these programs fall short is that the employer is sort of abdicating their responsibility for managing their employees. It’s a huge fundamental flaw,” Miele said.