

Ledger-Enquirer (Columbus, Ga.)
Small Business Challenge column Jan. 16, 2007

INEXPENSIVE FORMS OF EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION

Reward your employees when they go above and beyond

By Susan Miller

A friend of mine was employed at a large corporation several years ago when they were holding their annual employee recognition week. I asked him if this was the one week a year when his company takes a stab at making sure employees recognize that they work there. I suppose every company has employees who act as if they don't recognize that basic fact. Employee awareness events would work the same way. "Excuse me, but you are aware that you're employed here, right?"

I don't know about you, but my weekday morning alarm clock does a pretty good job of reminding me I'm employed. Or maybe not, considering my boss gave me a new clock radio at our recent Christmas gift exchange party.

But back to the story. This corporation had meals brought in every day, and even held parking lot cookouts. Employees played games and received themed T-shirts and gift items. They participated in crazy contests, like reverse beauty pageants. It was a week of total mayhem in the interest of showing employees that they are appreciated.

Last week's article listed a few New Year's resolutions that can be applied to your small business. One suggestion was to show your employees more often how much they are appreciated. It's unlikely that your small business has the resources for a week of parties and gift-giving festivities, but there are plenty of inexpensive ways to show employees your appreciation for a job well done.

Beyond the norm

But first let's look at what you should reward, which are behaviors and actions not normally expected and that you most want to see repeated. Employees are paid a salary for doing their job. They receive benefits to protect their well-being. Recognition and rewards should signify specific accomplishments over and above what is normally expected. So before you start handing out employee recognition plaques and gifts, ask yourself if the employee's behavior or action is rewardable. If not, rewards will lose their importance and could even become a demotivator for employees who truly deserve recognition.

A reward might recognize length of employment, which acknowledges service and dedication to your business. It's common to celebrate an employee's birthday but, when you think about it, are birthdays as much an accomplishment as length of service? Sure they're special, and some people — not me — are hurt if you don't make a big deal out of it. But other than continuing to breathe, what does it really take to have a birthday? It

certainly has less to do with dedication to your company than does the anniversary of an employee's hiring date.

Another type of recognition is directed to employees who have gone "above and beyond the call of duty." When I was with SouthTrust Bank in Huntsville, Ala., this was called the "Out of the Blue" award. It focused on one-time achievements rather than sustained performance over a period of time. I remember a colleague winning this quarterly award — which was an inexpensive, yet coveted crystal desktop statuette — for changing an elderly customer's flat tire in the parking lot. That's certainly not in a bank vice president's job description.

Saying thanks

Just because the situation doesn't call for formal recognition doesn't mean your employees can't be praised for what they're paid to do. Praise reinforces and motivates behaviors you want to see repeated, and can be delivered in sincere, yet unembellished ways.

Saying "thank you" can go a long way, but make sure to tell your employee exactly what you're thanking them for. Last week, I rode an airport shuttle from Eau Clair, Wis., to the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport. It's not surprising that I had to listen to one side of a corporate executive's cell phone calls for the majority of the two-hour ride. What was refreshing was that in call after call, I heard him thank colleagues and employees for specific actions. "Thank you for the extra time you spent Wednesday evening on the XYZ shipment. It enabled us to make our delivery date and resulted in a repeat order." "Thank you for keeping me posted on the Johnson project. Keeping me in the loop made yesterday's meeting very effective." Putting these types of comments in a written note takes just a couple of minutes and carries twice the punch for most people.

Personal touch

When you appreciate people, you go to the trouble to get to know them. It's no different in the workplace. By getting to know your employees, you'll be more able to show your appreciation in inexpensive, thoughtful, and unexpected ways. If an employee loves chocolate, surprise him or her by placing a candy bar on his or her desk. Pass along a book to an employee written by their favorite author. Bring bagels or doughnuts to a weekly morning meeting. People like recognition and gestures of appreciation that are random and that provide an element of surprise.

Ask your employees about things you know to be important to them like their pets, children, or hobbies. One day a few months ago I found some motorcycle-themed postage stamps in my inbox. When he saw the newly released stamps at the post office that day, my boss remembered that my husband and I ride motorcycles. That simple and sincere gesture carried more weight than any generic "thanks for your hard work" could have.

Everyone likes to be recognized for a job well done, and the benefits of making the effort can't be ignored. When properly bestowed, you'll realize increased productivity, improved attitudes, strengthened loyalty and commitment, and empowered employees with an increased sense of pride. And with those elements in place, you should never have to remind your employees they have a job.

Contact Susan Miller at miller_susan@colstate.edu.

Ledger-Enquirer (Columbus, Ga.)
March 18, 2007
Small Business Challenge Column

NETWORKING TO BOOST YOUR LUCK

Good business needs networking and good luck

By Susan Miller

'You can't win if you don't play.' That's what I told the convenience store clerk last Tuesday as I slid my \$5 bill across the counter for my chance to win the record-breaking \$390 million lottery jackpot. Her unaffected look told me she'd heard that one a couple hundred times. I was just trying to be friendly, and maybe generate a little good luck for myself in the process.

You can't convince me that winning the lottery is anything other than pure luck.

Some people think successful business owners are blessed with the same type of luck. But when it comes to winning in business, luck is just another word for earned opportunities.

Networking is an effective way to boost your luck quotient. In fact, an England-based study of people who consider themselves as lucky revealed the No. 1 shared characteristic to be that they networked on a regular basis. The second shared characteristic was that they possessed a positive attitude.

In other words, they create as many "chance opportunities" as possible, and expect good things to happen. And the best way to create opportunities is to get out there and network.

Unless you're a natural-born social butterfly, networking might be a little intimidating. It requires finesse, not just the ability to meet and be able to talk to anyone who'll listen.

So let's start with what I believe to be the basic rules of networking.

- The more people who know who you are and what you do, the more business you'll have.
- Networking is not about selling. It's about building relationships and showing a genuine interest in learning about other people and what they do.

Let's look at some tools you'll need for your networking skills toolbox.

The first tool, or skill, you'll need is to know what to say when someone asks, "What do you do?" The correct answer is not, "About what?" although I've always wanted to say that. The correct answer is called your audio logo, and it shows that you have the ability

to clearly and concisely state what you do. It gives you immediate credibility and shows others you are focused.

An audio logo should be no longer than 12 to 20 seconds in length, and should sound as if you enjoy what you do. Would you want to do business with someone who sounds as if they aren't that thrilled about what they do? I think not.

Here's a not-so-great audio logo: "I'm a real estate agent." One might think, "Oh boy, another real estate agent who's gonna ask me if I'm thinking of buying or selling a home."

Here's a better audio logo for the same person: "I enjoy helping people find their dream home. I'm a realtor with XYZ realty, and my goal is to make buying or selling a home as painless as possible!" There's no follow-up question about whether or not the other person is looking to buy or sell a home, or whether the person knows someone who's in the market to buy or sell.

Since networking is not about selling, you need to be prepared to talk about something other than what you sell. Small talk helps you develop and nurture relationships necessary for business and personal success. Always be prepared with two or three things to talk about. Ask questions and listen carefully for information needed to continue a logical channel of rapport.

Those two or three things to talk about should be about the other person, not about you. Keep subject matter noncontroversial and about which the other person can easily comment.

For example, "Have you eaten at the new Red Robin restaurant yet?" Or better yet, ask how the other person got started in their line of business. That's the movie-of-the-week question because everyone wants to tell their story. Continue with questions like, "What do you enjoy most about what you do?" That's a positive, feel-good question, and better than the opposite, "Do you ever get tired of dealing with your teen-aged customers?"

Inquiring about children is always a relationship-building topic, as are the topics of pets, their hometown or hobbies.

Don't avoid people because you can't remember their names. Find someone who can remind you of who they are, and reconnect with them immediately. And while we're on the subject, the 11th commandment of networking is, "Thou shalt not expect others to remember your name." If you're not wearing a name tag, make the first move and reintroduce yourself to someone who might not remember your name. It's all about making other people comfortable.

Avoid the networking event crutches of hanging around people you already know, or meeting and speaking with just one person for the entire event. A good rule of thumb is to reconnect with three people you already know, and meet at least three new people. It's also fun to hook up with someone you already know, and work the room together.

Introduce your business friend to three people she's never met, and ask her to do the same for you.

Remember that most people are not totally at ease when networking. But the fact that you are in the same country, in the same town, at the same event, at the same time, should be enough of a parallel for anyone to get a conversation started. When done correctly and consistently, you'll network your way to a gold mine of earned opportunities.

Contact Susan Miller at miller_susan@colstate.edu.

Ledger-Enquirer (Columbus, Ga.)
May 29, 2007
Small Business Challenge column

MAKING THE LEAP WITHOUT FALLING OR FAILING

By Susan Miller

At a lunch meeting at the Huntsville, Ala., Country Club many years ago, the chef was kind enough to accommodate my vegetarian meal request. The last of us were just finishing our main course when the servers began to bring in dessert, my favorite part of any meal --- breakfast included. I can still see it. It was a mile-high, dripping-with-fudge, death-by-chocolate creation accompanied by a generous scoop of vanilla bean ice cream. It was sinful. It was decadent. And I was ready for it. Only I didn't get it. What I got was a bowl of fruit.

This was when I was much younger and would never have made a scene. I smiled and ate my fruit, though any chocoholic will tell you, "fruit ain't dessert."

It was logical for the chef to assume someone who requests a vegetarian main course is probably health-conscious and, therefore, would also want a healthy dessert. Wrong in my case, but logical.

Though it has nothing to do with who gets dessert, this same type of logic is often innocently applied to sales organizations when it's assumed that a great salesperson will be a great sales manager. I'm not saying that this can never work, because it can. And when it does, it's the best decision a business can make. What I am saying is that you can't assume it will work. And when it doesn't work, you end up losing your best salesperson and gaining a lousy sales manager.

According to sales expert Jeffrey Gitomer, there are two main reasons that this is the most difficult jump in business. First, companies don't train managers before allowing them to take the position. Second, they don't plan for the dip in revenue that can occur when their top salesperson is no longer selling.

Let's look more closely at that first reason.

Why would you need to train a super salesman to help others become the same? Because selling and managing salespeople are two entirely different job responsibilities that have very little in common with one another. They are also two entirely different skill sets. For the most part, sales stars are like the Lone Ranger. They achieve individual goals and enjoy the personal freedom that goes along with being an army of one. Sales managers have to give up that independence and gain their job satisfaction through the efforts of the people they lead. They can't be the star any more. Instead, they have to hand out the stars, and give credit to the people they lead. That's what leaders do. They achieve things through other people by supporting, recognizing, and rewarding them.

Super salespeople sometimes have a pretty big ego and can be a little self-centered. And that's not a bad thing. If they didn't have a strong sense of self-worth, the rejection faced on a daily basis would squash them like a bug. That's one reason so many salespeople fail in their first year of sales. But for a sales manager to be effective, they have to check their ego at the door and be other-centered instead of self-centered.

Sales professionals should be trained in coaching and people development before taking a management role. They need to understand that managing people is not the same as managing processes. A super salesperson turned manager without training is likely to coach by telling his team how he sold, and expect everyone to do exactly what he did. The "this is how I did it, so this is what you should do" theory just does not hold water. The process or style that made him successful is not universally applicable, because everyone has a different selling style, and brings different strengths and talents to the table.

Knowing how to sell does not ensure that a person can help other people sell. Even though the overall objective of maximizing sales is the same for sales managers and team members, success in one area of performance does not guarantee success in future performance where different skills are required.

A Catch 22 situation

There is a Catch 22 to this scenario as well. As sales expert and author Mark White points out in his book, "Welcome to Sales Management," you have to have selling experience to become a sales manager. You've got to be able to say, "Been there, done that, got the T-shirt." And if it's a person's first time at bat as a sales manager, they need to have sold what his or her team is selling. That way he or she can concentrate on developing coaching and mentoring skills without having to learn new product lines as well.

After management skills have been developed, a switch in products or services is not as big a jump. If you can sell copy machines, you can sell heavy equipment. Likewise, if you coach and mentor copy machine sales people, you can coach and manage heavy equipment sales people. The skills are transferable, but they have to be developed first somewhere along the way.

If you're thinking about promoting a salesperson to the role of sales manager, first make sure it's something they want. While it may seem like a compliment and a natural next step, many salespeople are great at what they do because they love it and they are good at it, and they don't want to do something else. Salespeople also often have the ability to make more than sales managers when commissions come into play. If your superstar salesperson does want to make the move, it's a disservice to them and the company if you don't invest in preparing them for the move. Best case scenario, give them six months to prepare between the time you offer the position and actually have the salesperson take over as manager. After making the move, the first 90 days are crucial. If you wait, the damage might be irreversible and you could end up losing your entire sales force.

An assumption made at a luncheon some 20 years ago caused me to miss dessert. No big deal. I'm sure I made up for it before the sun went down. But an assumption made about a sales management decision could affect not only your business, but several careers as well. Don't let your sales manager or sales team suffer because of something you failed to do.

Contact Susan Miller at miller_susan@colstate.edu.

Ledger-Enquirer (Columbus, Ga.)
Nov. 13, 2007
Small Business Challenge column

HIGHER CALL THAN THE BOTTOM LINE?

By Susan Miller

Our friends Lavada and Willard have long since passed away, but I'll never forget a story they once shared with us about their little granddaughter.

She was barely 5 years old and was spending a few days with them while her parents were away on a trip. On the first morning of her visit, the little one scampered into her grandparents' bedroom, crawled up on the bed and strategically placed herself upright between the two of them for a morning visit. She noticed her grandparents' feet moving around under the covers, and she asked them what they were doing. Her grandma replied, "We're playing footsie."

The child thought about this very seriously for a few seconds and then matter-of-factly asked the older pair, "What is the object of the game?"

Your business is not a game, but if it were, what would be its objective?

If you ask any entrepreneur what the purpose of his or her business is, their first thought -- if not response --- would be, "To make money." But all businesses want to be profitable. Not too many business owners pick up their business license and exclaim, "Wow! I can't wait to start losing money!"

Your business should have a higher calling than the infamous bottom line. Its core reason for existing is the heart and soul of the business, and that purpose should be described in your organization's mission statement. Ideally, the mission statement should incorporate your reason for being, who you serve, and what you hope to achieve.

It doesn't need to be of manuscript length. Every single word in your statement should be absolutely necessary --- no added fluff or redundancy. In fact, it's best to keep your mission statement to around 25 words, short enough for employees to memorize and, as management guru Peter Drucker suggests, concise enough to fit on a T-shirt.

Your mission statement should be visionary, but at the same time every word should be absolutely believable. If it's too lofty, it loses credibility. Make it practical and workable. A mission to eliminate homelessness is far-reaching and impractical. A mission to find the best possible solutions that will help to alleviate homelessness is believable.

Since the only constant in any business is change, craft your statement in the broadest of terms or you could end up revising it annually. Classmates.com's original mission included reuniting high school students. But the company quickly evolved to reach

colleges, universities, military units, and even businesses. A broader and more lasting mission statement would have dropped the reference to high schoolers, and would have included that it was a personal network for reconnecting people.

Your statement should also be easily understood. Darrell Zahorsky, president of Profit Innovators Inc., suggests that your mission statement be able to pass what he calls the Mother Test. Before I pass this along, I am fully aware that there are some very smart mothers out there. I have one myself. But I believe there is merit to his suggestion to show your mission statement to your mother. If she does not understand it, start again.

The Mother Test cuts two ways. If your statement is too wordy, mothers have a way of cutting through the compost and getting to the heart of the matter pretty quickly. A by-product of having raised children, I think.

The mission statement of eBay exemplifies all of these attributes. It's concise and easily understood, broad and visionary yet believable, and its simplicity yields a bit of excitement: "eBay's mission is to provide a global trading platform where practically anyone can trade practically anything."

Mission statements are for both your customers and your employees, and they should be written in a way that will not only excite customers about doing business with you, but also attract the best employees. One mission statement may serve to do both, or you may have two mission statements --- one for customers and another for employees.

Southwest Airlines' external mission statement is "dedication to the highest quality of customer service delivered with a sense of warmth, friendliness, individual pride, and company spirit." Their mission statement to their employees is a bit longer than a traditional mission statement, but it shows that being committed to your employees is as important as taking care of the customer: "We are committed to provide our employees a stable work environment with equal opportunity for learning and personal growth. Creativity and innovation are encouraged for improving the effectiveness of Southwest Airlines. Above all, employees will be provided the same concern, respect, and caring attitude within the organization that they are expected to share externally with every Southwest customer."

When a customer sees your mission statement, they should be able to say, "That's what happened." When an employee reads it, they should be able to say, "That's exactly what we do."

Fully embrace your mission statement. Live it, talk it, show it and implant it in the minds of your employees. A mission statement serves as your guide whether times are good or bad. Use it as a moral and organizational compass, always asking if decisions are in line with the values and goals that encompass your mission.

Whether it's written for customers, employees, or both, your statement should not be stuck in a frame or file cabinet and forgotten about. If it's created and subsequently

ignored, then the time, energy, and thought that went into crafting it was nothing more than an exercise in futility.

Having fun in business is important, but business is more than a game. Do you have, communicate, and follow a mission statement? Or are you just playing around?

Contact Susan Miller at miller_susan@colstate.edu