



How Hard Would You Work For A...

by Nancy Lamberton

Lunch with the Redskins?
Wine country limousine tour?
Chance to drive a race car?



Companies of all sizes have long used incentive and recognition programs to reward and motivate their loyal employees and customers – often using traditional awards such as gift certificates, pre-paid credit cards, merchandise or travel. Today, innovative companies are turning to the concept of experiential rewards to show appreciation, rewarding employees and clients alike with a chance to go hang gliding, a class with a master chef or a race in a NASCAR.

Experts have long studied the specific elements behind successful rewards programs and they all agree: programs must contain an element of surprise and trigger the pleasure sensors in the brain. Imagine the rush of anticipation as you kick off a sales contest with a Weekend in a Ferrari as the prize, or the facial expression when you hand a valued client a “thank you” which sits them right in the penalty box of the Washington Capital’s VIP experience. Or, let them choose which experience is most appealing by creating a program around experience “gift packages,” in which similarly priced experiences offer a smorgasbord of exciting options making each reward feel personalized. With experiential awards, the buzz of excitement lasts a long time – from program launch and award presentation; as winners deliberate and choose their experiences and then again, as the lucky recipients recalls each and every detail of their experience.

One local company capitalizing on experiential rewards is GTSI, a leading provider of technology services. Bridgette Atkinson, Senior VP of Human Resources began using experiences last year for GTSI’s quarterly Unsung Heroes awards. Atkinson reports, “We’ve found that awarding experiences has had a much greater impact than the pre-paid credit card that we previously used. With essentially the same budget, we’re giving our deserving employees something that is cutting edge, distinctive and memorable. It has been an outstanding success.” For this rewards program, GTSI used experience gift packages which offered the recipients a choice: a countryside tour in a vintage biplane, herding longhorn cattle at a nearby dude ranch, indulging in a luxurious day at the spa or a private behind the scenes tour of the National Aquarium in Baltimore. In this way, a single reward works for all the recipients yet still feels individual and inspired.

Another company that has directly witnessed the advantages of such personalized rewards is the Chevy Chase-based environmental engineering firm, Kynoch Environmental Manage-

ment, Inc. “I was looking for a new and exciting way to inspire and reward our team. Experiences offered the perfect solution for both a memorable reward and choices that worked for my budget. Everyone was thrilled with the unexpected gift and we are still hearing the buzz as people choose and go on their experiences.”, said J. Brent Kynoch, President. The rewards are so popular with Kynoch’s employees that he has given them two years in a row.

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Rewards of experience can also supplement existing travel reward programs. Many companies give top sales people expensive travel rewards, while other employees get less impressive awards or nothing at all. One interesting way to use experiences is to ‘motivate the middle.’ Experiential awards can be used to reward the support team and all the people who have contributed to the success of a company’s top performers – typically the only ones to get rewards. Building on a common theme, the cost-effective experiential rewards can work hand-in-hand with the travel awards to get the entire team to its goal.

While the idea of experience-as-reward or gifts has resonated for some time in Europe, it is a relatively new – yet rapidly expanding – concept in the United States. In total, the corporate incentive, gifts and promotional products market is \$15

billion each year. With so much invested in rewarding valued employees and customers, it makes sense to maximize their benefit by giving something that, unlike a cash award, positions your company on the leading edge and creates lasting memories. Also, with the growing interest in eco-friendly consumerism, most experiences gifts are also the perfect choice for environmentally conscious employers, employees and customers. A guided mountain bike tour, a glider experience, survival training or whitewater rafting all deliver the opportunity to experience and appreciate our planet while leaving a minimal footprint.

Studies show that cash awards are remembered for the shortest amount of time so why not offer something that is personal, innovative and even adrenaline-pumping? The memories created when an employee learns to kayak or dives with the sharks or creates glass art with a master glass blower will long outlive the engraved plaque or crystal piece stashed in the closet or the tank of gas purchased with a pre-paid credit card. Creating that rush and sense of enjoyment is what rewards are all about.

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About Excitations.com – Founded in early 2005, Excitations is a woman owned and run premier experiential gift giving company based in Northern Virginia offering over a thousand unique, exclusive and exciting experiences across the country. To inquire about using Excitations’ gifts for your company, go to www.Excitations.com or email Excitations at businessaccounts@excitations.com. ■

