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Companies Find Creative Ways To Show Employees They Are Appreciated

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By Ellen Williams-Masson

The fringe benefits were sweet, but the affirmation was even sweeter.

When Jenn Jackson was orchestrating procurement for the 364-unit Lucky apartment building at 777 University Avenue, she was rewarded with a taste bud-tickling tour of the finest chocolatiers in San Francisco.

"I chose San Francisco because I am a foodie," Jackson said, adding that she traveled with a fellow foodie friend who once lived in the Bay area. "We had an all-day chocolate adventure and spent an afternoon in the Napa Valley. We really just wine and dined."

The three-night trips for two are a welcome perk for an honoree each year at Brownhouse , an interior design and architecture firm of eight employees in downtown Madison. Funding the all-expense paid vacations without draining company coffers requires an ingenious approach from owner Laurel Brown.

"We take all our frequent flyer points from our company credit cards and work with a travel agent to come up with a way to give a trip to an employee," Brown said. "Sometimes I have to tip in a few hundred dollars because there's not quite enough, but it's not very much and I think it's a really nice gesture."

Honorees are selected by staff vote – Brown abstains from voting – and announced in a ceremony where the reasons supporting their nomination are read aloud. Jackson, who was recognized for being a "Jill of all trades" in the office in addition to her responsibilities at Lucky, savored the validation from her peers almost as much as the bonus trip to the West coast.

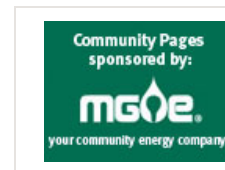
"I knew that my coworkers valued what I was doing and saw value in the contributions that I was making on a day-to-day basis, things that maybe your boss wouldn't see but a staff member would recognize as really helpful," Jackson said. "That affirmation of the work I was doing in and of itself didn't cost anything – it was just a matter of providing the feedback."

Showing employee appreciation in a struggling economy can seem as decadent as a hand-rolled chocolate truffle, but shoring up employee morale can help Capital Region businesses withstand economic battering during the ongoing recession.

Associate professor Mark Barnard, Edgewood College School of Business, emphasized the importance of treating employees as individuals and maintaining good employee-supervisor relations.

"Often a supervisor can have a lot of influence and impact on their subordinates, so working on maintaining a good and open relationship with employees will certainly help, especially during bad economic times," Barnard said.

"Some employees may only be motivated by money and there's no way to get around that, but many employees are motivated



by the atmosphere in the office, socialization issues or growth opportunities for themselves. It's important for their immediate supervisors to understand that and work within the framework they have in the company to try and reward and recognize employees in ways that are appropriate to each individual employee."

Social events like holiday office parties, ice cream socials, team outings and catered dinners throughout their busy tax season are all part of the culture at Virchow Krause and Company , the largest Wisconsin-based certified public accounting firm with a staff of more than 1300 employees.

"There has been a lot of press lately that organizations are canceling their holiday parties, but we actually feel very strongly that in times like this we need to bring people together to celebrate our success and appreciate our employees," human resources director Jeff Hackel said.

"Particularly when money is tighter, we ask more of our employees – for higher levels of performance and productivity – so it is critical to recognize those extra efforts that are being asked of folks."

In the spirit of soothing frazzled nerves, Orange Tree Imports offers chair massages for staff during the store's peak season in December. Leah Edgar, who has worked on the sales floor for five years, said the annual Christmas party and chair massages "keep morale high," one of the goals for Orange Tree Imports manager Nanci Bjorling.

"Everybody wants to feel that they are appreciated," Bjorling said. "The staff works incredibly hard and very, very long hours at the holiday season, so any little thing at all we can do to help them feel they are really important helps morale. A lot of times people just hear negative things, they don't hear the praise, so you really have to be conscious of that and make sure they are hearing the good things also."

Affirmation is part of the routine at family law firm Balisle and Roberson S.C., where employees gather for brown bag lunch meetings every other Monday to celebrate accomplishments and learn of compliments passed along from clients. Chair massages, birthday lunches and a stash of fresh fruits and other healthy snacks in the kitchen are additional ways the firm shows it values its staff of 20 employees.

"Showing employee appreciation is just good business," legal administrator John Schellinger said.

The service industry can foster a sense of community that transcends normal employee relations, an important perk for residential coordinator Jackie Gess, a 39-year-veteran of St. Coletta of Wisconsin.

One of the oldest Catholic service organizations in the country, St. Coletta is headquartered in Jefferson and serves adults with developmental and other disabilities in southern Wisconsin and northern Illinois.

In addition to picnics and parties throughout the year, St. Coletta emphasizes staff appreciation with a variety of social and educational activities during their Mission Effectiveness week in February.

"You feel like you are in a community because of the people that you work with, and especially the clients," Gess said. "I have made good friends over the years – it's wonderful here."

St. Coletta also offers employees tuition assistance through Cardinal Stritch University . Additional training, whether provided internally or offsite, packs a double punch for cash-strapped companies by increasing employee satisfaction and ultimately building a more competent work force.

"If an employee wants a particular type of training, there are a number of courses and one-day seminars offered that would be less expensive but still help the employee continue to grow in his or her job, and also show appreciation that you are investing in your employees in some way," Barnard said.

Verizon Wireless , regionally headquartered in West Allis, provides online seminars and live web casts for its national workforce of more than 70,000 employees. Investment strategies, money management skills and benefits training are common themes geared toward increasing the long-term financial security of the company's work force.

"Any way that we can make it easier for our employees to take advantage of our benefits and reap the rewards of that in a quicker time frame, to help making it easier on their cash flow and pocketbook, that is what we are trying to do," spokesperson Carolyn Schamberger said. "We are really trying to highlight with our employees the importance of carefully planning and managing both their savings and expenses to help them make the most of their money."

Expanding job responsibilities is another way companies can show trust in employees, but Barnard cautions that simply piling on more work or bestowing "inflated titles" under the guise of showing appreciation usually backfires.

"Those are nice, but really what the employees want is to be shown respect and given more responsibility, whether or not that comes with a title or even whether or not that comes with a raise," Barnard said. "You are not giving them more work in terms of more hours, but you are giving them more important work and motivating them by not just monetary means but some of the self-fulfillment that employees can feel from having additional tasks and responsibilities given to them."











End-of-the-year bonuses and profit sharing programs are more traditional means of showing employee appreciation that can be tougher to justify during a recession. Virgil Hartje, president of Hartje Lumber Inc.

in La Valle, pays his employees a 10 percent bonus and invests 15 percent of their annual salary in the company's retirement plan at the end of every year his business shows enough profit.

"It adds up, but I've made the money before I hand it out," Hartje said. "I'm assured of a profit before I share any, so it's a good safety valve."











Linking employees' financial success with a company's bottom line can help weather trying economic times, as Hartje witnessed when the lumberyard failed to show a profit in 1985, three years after he started the profit sharing program.

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"They asked, 'Can we get back on it if we make you money?'" Hartje said. "I said, 'You bet,' and since 1985 we've been having it again."

Simply saying thanks

As Jenn Jackson discovered prior to her chocolate lovers' tour of San Francisco, peer affirmation can build cohesion and lead to greater satisfaction in the workplace. Employees at The North Central Group in Middleton recognize coworkers with "Exceptional You" notes that can be traded for snacks and other treats in the company's "You Rock!" box. Managers have the option of enclosing gift cards in the notes, and employees receiving an annual President's award take home a plaque or trophy and a check for \$500.

"We embrace having fun in the workplace because you are here all the time," human resources manager Laurie Halzel said. "These little things like the Exceptional You cards really perk up someone's day. It helps promote good will amongst employees and a fun atmosphere of helpfulness to each other."

Recognizing employees for fulfilling company goals helped Core Creative in Milwaukee earn The Business Journal's "Best Places to Work" award in 2006.

"At the end of the summer we had fun giving creative awards to showcase how people are doing well at their jobs or supporting our internal brand, which means giving MVP service to our clients," public relations director Beth Crivello-Wagner said. "We try to find creative ways to celebrate one another."

Core Creative is also considering a plan to allow employees to bank and share vacation time with coworkers in need of extended medical leave, perks that that Crivello-Wagner described as "not necessarily out-of-pocket cost for the company, but ways that we can share and help one another."

Catastrophic events unify employees as well as communities, as Alliant Energy witnessed during last summer's flooding in southern Wisconsin and northern Iowa. With their corporate headquarters in Cedar Rapids under water and many staff and customers displaced by the flooding, Alliant Energy employees worked "24/7" setting up alternative work sites as well as assisting with sandbagging and other community service work.

"There's a real sense of pride among employees when they live through instances like those, it's almost like a badge of pride," said Debbie Newton-Tainter, senior employee development manager at Alliant Energy.

When the crisis had passed, Alliant Energy recognized employees with personal notes from vice presidents and managers, articles on the company's intranet and certificates of recognition. Chief human resources officer Tom Drury emphasized the importance of also showing employee appreciation during times of financial crisis.

"The business of finding, retaining and motivating employees doesn't change with the economic environment; in fact, I would say that as we are asked to do more with less, having good programs and practices in place is critical," Drury said.

For San Francisco foodie Jenn Jackson, the glow of her colleagues' appreciation helped carry her through tasks "above and beyond the scope" of her previous responsibilities. A fifth-generation Madisionian, Jackson is currently working as the director of membership development for Downtown Madison Inc.

Showing appreciation acknowledges the critical impact employees have on a company's success, a basic courtesy that Brownhouse owner Laurel Brown said some people overlook.

"It's important to understand what motivates people and have a sense of humility from an owner's standpoint, realizing that they really cannot run their company and do what they do without the people who work for them," Brown said. "It's truly a team effort - if an owner thinks it is all because of them, they are sadly mistaken."

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