

Let's have some serious fun

(When employees love the brand, customers love it too)

By Allan Gorman

I'm at my local Volkswagen dealership and the founder's son is walking around handing out Christmas bonus checks.

I've seen this fellow before and he impresses me as taciturn and uncomfortable. He's in his late 30s-early 40s and looks and acts like a bean counter -- stiff, protective and defensive. It seems a strain for him to part with the envelopes -- not a pleasure and an expression of gratitude, but an annoying obligation.

"Ok. Here's your bonus check. Thanks for a good year. No, don't shake my hand. I don't want to take a chance of getting grease on my starched white shirt. Ok, let's go back to work now."

I get the feeling that, although the employees are receiving a gift, most will be unhappy with this bonus check (no matter what the dollar amount), and would jump at the chance of working somewhere else.

Witnessing this scenario doesn't make me feel that I'd want to work for this owner either. And, as a customer, it also makes me re-think my commitment to his dealership. If this guy doesn't value his employees, does he value his customers? Does he think that we're an obligation too?

The experience your customer has is a reflection of how your employee feels

With all the pressures that fall on business owners and managers, many of us overlook the importance of maintaining a happy and inviting corporate culture.

We think that our employees automatically owe us the courtesy of being nice and accommodating to our customers.

But we all should take a break once in a while to remember that the happiness of our employees is often the result of how good they feel about the company they're working for.

The same "out-of-the-box" thinking that goes into creating a winning brand through a unique customer experience needs to transform your internal culture as well.

Serious fun from the top down

I was listening to a recent interview with Matt Weinstein who wrote the book *Work Like Your Dog --50 ways to Work Less, Play More and Earn More*.

Matt's book outlines a bunch of scenarios for bringing fun and play into the workplace that, beyond just the event itself, can have a positive effect on your employees throughout the year.

A unique and unexpected fun experience -- just once in a while -- can have a contagious and residual effect that will leave your company smiling all year long.

Fun that gets talked about beyond the event

Fun in the workplace alleviates stress in the office. It boosts morale, creates loyalty and pays off in monetary dividends that result from happy, enthusiastic workers.

Here's how it works--

1. Someone brings in a bouquet of flowers and gives it to a co-worker to watch over for just an hour. That person then has to pass the bouquet to someone else in the office. The anticipation of who's going to become chosen next becomes a great game that can keep everyone smiling and can last a few days -- and get talked about for months!
2. Take your employees on a buying trip to the mall. Give each a hundred bucks and one hour. The caveat is to buy at least three things for themselves with the money. If they fail to get three (or more) items, or if they don't spend the money on something personal, they forfeit the hundred bucks. If they don't spend all the money, they have to return the balance.

Watch how they leap to life and buzz about how much fun it was. Watch them show off and compare the purchases they made. Watch how they smile like kids in a candy store. Doesn't this beat a cold, obligatory bonus envelope at Christmas time? (Of course, the dollar amount can be \$200 or \$500, or even more; and the venue can change too. And why wait for Christmas? Sometime totally unexpected is even better!)

3. Instead of a casual Friday, have a formal Friday --where everyone has to dress up in formal evening wear. A twist on this is dress the supervisor day: let all the charges in each department decide what each supervisor has to wear next Friday (within reason of course). Then have a fashion show of the supervisors and award a prize to the department with the best outfit.

Etc. Have some internal classes run by your local history museum, zoo or astronomical observatory. Hire a fortune-teller for a day.

These are a few examples, but you should look to create a few unique fun-builders of your own -- that stem from the manager's heart, but take expression on your employees' faces.

Fun has a serious effect on your bottom line, too

Imagine walking into a firm where everyone has a big grin on their face. You might start to smile too. There's something contagious in the atmosphere.

Now imagine one where everyone is stressed and wearing a frown. The service is rude and you feel like you are burdening them.

Who'd you rather do business with?

Which firm would you want to go back to?

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