

Twelve “Red Hot” Employee Motivation Ideas for the Summer Months

Don't let employees' energy fade in the lazy, hazy days of summer. Check out these 12 fun activities to boost their motivation.

Many executives think the start of the New Year is the best time to launch a new incentive program. They'd be wrong. While January is certainly an ideal time to kick off a major, yearlong program, experts say summer is actually the perfect time to cook up some mini incentives. Why? Summer is the season when employees' energy is focused on other things, like their upcoming vacations.

Indeed, “Summer is a great time to introduce a new initiative and focus on a new achievement to keep people rolling along,’ says Adrian Gostick, coauthor of *A Carrot A Day* and director of corporate communication with employee recognition firm O.C. Tanner Company. So forget traditional summer holidays, like the Fourth of July. We've cooked up 12 fun “holidays’ to give employees an extra dose of energy during the dog days of summer.

1. Customize Your Cubicle Day

Nothing makes an employee feel more like a drone than toiling away in a bland, undecorated cubicle. But some people don't have free time to spruce up their spaces. So set a few hours aside for them to design their own name plaques. This day engages every employee and helps them to see their co-workers in a different light. “Maybe ultra-conservative Ted feels free enough to use lots of bright colors or maybe Francis' cubicle ends up looking like it could be in a magazine,’ says Dianna Podmoroff, human resources consultant. “This type of expression shows what's inside a person – the stuff they usually keep closely guarded.’ Simply provide the glue, glitter, crayons and other art materials. Colorful logoed aprons will keep the mess under wraps too. Once the creative juices start flowing you'll be surprised by the gallons of great ideas your employees have.

2. Special Memo Day

With e-mail and text messaging as the norm, traditional paper memos have become nearly obsolete. But bring back the old days this summer by planning old-school ways to deliver messages at the office. For example, electricity producer Pacific Power in Portland, OR, planned a day to use Frisbees instead of traditional mail to deliver interoffice memos, says Gostick.

For your own variation, attach messages to candy bars and ask employees to personally deliver them to their co-workers. (Some vendors even provide candy bars customized with a company's logo or branding message). Everyone loves a tasty treat, and they won't feel bad indulging since they'll be walking more than usual to deliver the memos. Add a “getting to know you’ activity by requiring that each employee learn and

remember something new about each person they talk to that day. Digital keychains and photo frames reinforce the memory theme.

3. Bling Bling Day

Ladies know that any time of year is a perfect time to receive jewelry. And some guys appreciate a little bling, too. So starting a summer incentive program to earn jewelry is a gem of an idea. For example, offer a charm bracelet to female employees. Each time they reach another goal, they receive a new charm that symbolizes something for the company. If you're a cosmetics supplier, try tiny nail polish bottles or mirrors. A writing instrument company could use pens and pencils. And so on.

For male employees, offer masculine rings with wider bands and bigger stones. For example, Southern Wine and Spirits, a Florida-based beverage distributor gave Super Bowl-style rings to truck drivers with great safety records. The program reduced the company's safety-related financial losses by 70%. To keep the ball rolling, make the ring upgradeable, so that at each level of the program, men can get a new engraving or jewel.

4. Introduce a New Award Day

If your employees have become bored with the usual awards that you deliver, try something completely unorthodox. Make the award lighthearted and maybe even humorous; however, ensure that it still has an element of honor attached to it. For example, the Hewlett-Packard Company offers a goofy yet very prestigious award, says Bob Nelson, Ph.D, president of Nelson Motivation Inc. in San Diego and author of *1001 Ways To Reward Employees*. A few years ago, when an HP engineer burst into his manager's office to announce he'd just found the solution to a problem they'd been struggling with for weeks, his manager grabbed the first item on his desk to acknowledge the accomplishment – a banana from his lunch. Although at first a puzzling and silly choice, the Golden Banana Award has become one of the most prestigious honors given to an inventive HP employee.

Come up with your own fun but meaningful award this summer. Pick something that ties in to your company's core products or services and resonates strongly with employees. "It's a rather complex process to identify what motivates each of your employees, but we find the most engaged and satisfied employees work for managers who get to know employees' unique drivers and goals in life," says Gostick. For example, if your company makes high-quality custom candles, give a silver matchbook award. Or if you specialize in accessories for footwear, give a "Golden Sole" trophy in the shape of a shoe.

5. Company Picnic Day

Company picnics are a ubiquitous summertime activity. But don't take them for granted because nothing says employee appreciation like a fun outdoor gathering with free food.

Keep in mind, though, that no matter how exciting the activity, it still eats up employees' personal time. So don't make the picnic seem like work. "The company picnic is a treat that brings everyone together for a playful and relaxing afternoon," says Podmoroff. "Families meet and mingle, the company is brought down to an informal level and everyone – executives to housekeeping staff – should participate in the activities as equals." And there's plenty of ways to make sure your company picnic packs a real punch.

Choose summertime foods like hamburgers, hot dogs, veggie burgers and corn-on-the-cob. But remember to help keep everyone's teeth clean with logoed floss or a compact mirror that lets them scope out their pearly whites after the meal. In addition, have plenty of water on hand (with custom labels), especially if there will be relay races or scavenger hunts. And after the main course, the crowd will be seeking some sweets. Fruit cobblers and even Jell-O (you could mold it in the shape of a company logo) are perfect after-picnic fare.

All these goodies can be glammed up by serving them on logoed plates and napkins. For logoed products that will last a long time, go for a custom CD labeled "Picnic Party Mix," vibrant colored T-shirts for relay race teams or a beach bag packed with a towel, cooler and beach ball.

6. Homemade Ice Cream Day

Homemade ice cream can be quite tasty. And getting the whole company together for such a teamwork-oriented project will boost morale – especially when they get to enjoy the tasty treat at the end of all their efforts. "It's important to do something to help bring your people together and bond during this very distracting time of year," says Gostick. There are a few routes to take when making homemade ice cream. Old-fashioned ice cream makers that are essentially a bucket with a manual turn handle work if you want to be really nostalgic. For a quick fix, check out modern ice cream makers from companies like Cuisinart.

7. Employee Car Wash Day

Nothing takes away the allure of a cool car like a dirty surface. But the last thing your employees feel like doing at the end of a hard day is scrubbing their cars. So do them a favor and plan a day to wash all the employees' cars. Keep in mind, though, that you should be excited to do this for your employees. But don't try too hard. "When the boss is flipping burgers (or in this case scrubbing your windshield) it's a great 'ha ha' but if you know that the boss is uncomfortable doing it or trying to be someone else, then the employees know it too," says Podmoroff. "It all comes down to genuineness – a fake anything is worth nothing." Imprinted towels, squeegees and air fresheners will help make the day wet and wild.

8. Weekend Retreat

A weekend getaway can be both fun and educational, but make sure the location is easy to reach and no more than a few hours away. You don't want to inconvenience the employees that you're supposed to be rewarding. "Don't dismiss the fact that people like to get together outside of work time," says Gostick, "But remember they want to get together on a more relaxed basis." So if you want to incorporate education into the retreat, be sure to choose an upbeat speaker. And even if sales are down or you've received complaints about your customer service department, don't address these problems during the retreat. You don't want to make employees feel like you dragged them away from home to berate them about bad performance. "A retreat is a special form of recognition that comes with prestige and honor, two highly motivating factors," says Podmoroff. Up the honor factor by sending them home with cool giveaways like a T-shirt or totebag.

9. Bring Your Customer to Work Day

Nobody likes to be lonely. So it makes sense that when people pool together for a common cause, they yield positive results. "People must feel like a part of a group to be motivated," says Peter W. Schutz, the former CEO of Porsche and author of *The Driving Force*. "They have to feel that they're working together to accomplish something worthwhile." So during his years at Porsche, Schutz gave customers the chance to compliment the factory workers. When a Porsche fan visited with Schutz, he took that person into the factory and introduced him to the employees. He then urged the customer to ask the employees to explain how they put the car together. "If you give people an opportunity to explain to a customer what it is they do and how they do it, then that gives their job more purpose," says Schutz. And since employees with more purpose create better results and more sales, you should consider setting a day aside to bring your customers to work. And keep in mind that your employees and customers are the only reason you have a business in the first place, says Schutz. So don't send them home empty-handed.

10. Employee Sports Day

Whether it's a table-tennis tournament or a slow-pitch softball game, employee sports activities promote teamwork, and in turn, loyalty.

You could give away logoed birdies during an employee badminton competition. And team T-shirts and hats will make employees feel like a tight-knit group. If they're not the athletic types, then take your employees to see some professional athletes. For example, Nashville-based public relations firm Seigenthaler Public Relations Inc. flew its entire award-winning staff to Chicago, IL, for a Cubs game in June to celebrate its success and the opening of a new Chicago office. "The trip to Chicago is meant first and foremost as a fun outing and there is no agenda except to have a great day together as a company," says CEO Elizabeth S. Courtney. "The event also built camaraderie among employees in a nonwork environment, and provided an opportunity to identify everyone in the company more closely with the agency's new Chicago office."

11. Cookout Over Lunch Hour Day

A lunchtime cookout lets employees have fun on the company's time and dollar. You send the message that, "I'm okay with this because I trust my employees will continue to get their jobs done and will reward me with excellent work, loyalty and commitment," says Podmoroff. Disposable cameras with custom labeling, a gift certificate for free photo developing, picture frames and custom-labeled CDs like "BBQ Bash Music" will make the cookout unforgettable. "Logoed products help reinforce a family or team culture – having a company mug means you belong to something," says Podmoroff.

12. Act Like a Kid Day

Even though you have to maintain some level of maturity at work, you'll find that a set time to goof off is just what employees need during the summer months. "We're all part of a larger seasonal cycle of life ingrained from 12 to 16 or more years of being on a school calendar while growing up," says Nelson. No wonder people of all ages want to have fun in the summertime. So break out Monopoly, set up the checker boards and prepare the Slinkies to race down the stairs.

If you can't afford to lose an entire day to child's play, plan the activity for 4 p.m. on a Friday. "You're probably not going to take a bunch of Wall Street analysts out to have a water gun fight in the parking lot," says Gostick, "but it's amazing how people like to let their hair down." For example, Gostick worked with a pharmaceutical company whose manager bought remote-control cars for employees to race. "The employees rolled their eyes at first, but by the end they were screaming and cheering," says Gostick. If you still think your employees are too uptight for childish games, simply ask what activities interest them. No matter what that activity may be, cameras, photo albums or journal books will keep the fun memories alive.

You might be thinking that these activities require a lot of work and provide little results. But motivational experts say it's the little things you do for your employees on a regular basis that count. While the annual company bash may be the talk of the office for the weeks surrounding the event, small monthly activities will keep your employees feeling appreciated all year around. Your relationship with them is like a relationship with a significant other, Gostick says. "Would it cut it for you if your significant other only said 'I love you' once a year?" he says. "We don't think so. And in the business world, 'I love you' means 'thank you' and is expressed through employee activities."

Moreover, according to recent research by O.C. Tanner, organizations that effectively recognize employee excellence had a return on assets (ROA) more than three times higher than firms who don't have recognition programs. The bottom line? Show your employees a little love and they'll give you a lot back