

A man with a full beard and mustache, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and red tie, stands on the left. A woman with curly hair, wearing a grey business suit, a white blouse, and a multi-strand necklace, stands on the right. They are both smiling and looking down. The background is a bright, outdoor setting with a blurred landscape.

GROWING BUSINESS

THROUGH EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION AND CUSTOMER APPRECIATION

INTRODUCTION

It's a simple concept: Everyone wants to feel valued. But when it comes to the workplace, that idea often gets bogged down in manager-employee dynamics or invoices to a client. People are what make your business tick, whether internally or externally, and knowing how to recognize those relationships is key to continued success.

It's vital that company leaders and managers understand how to keep those relationships strong—and all it really takes is a meaningful token of recognition. “Sending a gift reminds my clients that I value them as lifelong clients and want to maintain a relationship with them,” says Beth Stephan, a Realtor at [Perdomo Properties](#). “By sending a gift after a closing, during the holiday season or as a thank you for a referral, I hope to express how thankful I am for all of these relationships.”



Here's how to keep your employees and clients engaged and feeling loved.



FOCUS ON SENTIMENT, NOT PRICE

“Whether you’re recognizing an employee, reinforcing a relationship with a client or cultivating a prospect, there are two things to keep in mind: The recognition and the symbol of the recognition,” says Paul Hebert, senior director of solutions architecture at [Creative Group](#).

When commemorating something—an achievement, a milestone or an anniversary—you need to identify what it is and why it made a difference. “Without that,” adds Paul, “anything you do is just a pat on the back and it doesn’t mean nearly as much as it should.”

That can be simple with employees: “Tell the individual how a contribution they made directly affected the business,” recommends Todd Horton, founder and CEO of [KangoGift](#), an employee recognition company that works with businesses on their reward and culture programs. For example, to recognize an achievement, talk about how the company benefited through increased revenue or reputation when the employee acted or performed a certain way.



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- Paul Hebert, Creative Group

For clients, it may consist of recognizing an anniversary of the relationship, or a celebration of how long the client has been in business. Hebert recommends thinking about celebrating client relationships in the same way you celebrate employee relationships. “We recognize that we’re glad employees are still here; why don’t we do that with customers?” Because it’s not as common, it can make a bigger impact when you do.

“The item you give as part of the recognition then reinforces the sentiment,” Hebert says, noting that he has a watch he was given in 1986 for running a fundraising campaign the second year he was with a company. “The president came to me and talked about how well it went; he listed about seven reasons as to why I had made it a success.”

The watch doesn’t work anymore, but Hebert says he won’t get rid of it, because it’s a tangible reminder of the appreciation the president expressed.

It’s important to remember that the item doesn’t have to be wildly expensive to be valuable. In fact, according to the [2016 Corporate Gift IQ Survey](#) from [Incentive Magazine](#), almost a quarter of employers give employee or corporate gifts valued at \$25 to \$49 each. Food is a popular gift: More than two-thirds of respondents say they give gift cards, and 58 percent of those cards are to restaurants or other dining options. Almost a third of respondents say they give some kind of food as corporate gifts.



Even a note can make a big impression. “I’ve had terminated employees say ‘I don’t want anything out of my files—except, three years ago, a manager wrote me a thank-you card. Could I get that?’” says Mary Cooley, principal consultant for HR Solutions, a human resources assistance group.

People like to feel good, and it doesn’t always take a lot to make that happen. And while it’s a kind and generous thing to do, it can pay off for companies: Research suggests that reinforcing good work and rewarding great work leads an employee to have a greater commitment to the organization.



MAKE IT MEANINGFUL TO THE RECIPIENT

One of the most useful things to remember when recognizing employees or clients is what's known as the Platinum Rule.

It goes beyond the Golden Rule, which implies the basic assumption that other people would like to be treated the way that you would like to be treated. To really ensure your actions are meaningful to others, treat them the way they want to be treated. Granted, this takes work on your end to determine what that treatment might be. But the investment of time and effort pays off in ways you may not have considered.

The easiest way to figure out what's meaningful to an employee is to ask, but many managers shy away from doing so because they don't want to be seen as invasive. "Simply asking an employee what they like to do outside of the office is a way to safely establish what an employee values," Horton says. "Remember that most employees don't feel like their managers show appreciation enough," he adds. "They want you to look for ways to offer a personalized feedback experience."

That can be trickier for clients, but there are still tools you can use. "Social media has made it possible to learn more about clients and employees beyond business interactions," says Larry Oakner, senior partner at [Tenet Partners](#), a brand and innovation consulting firm and whose practice area covers employee and customer engagement. "Clients or employees who post on LinkedIn,

Twitter or Facebook often reveal what's important to them in their world. For example, if they use Pinterest, that can give you a sense of their personal style. Do they believe in social causes? A favorite sports team or college? Are they connected to charitable organizations? You can find out how people treat others and be able to respond in kind—donating to their causes and supporting their efforts with innovative ideas."

In addition, to go beyond the relationship, you have to put the focus on the client. "You might recognize the anniversary of when your client became your customer," Hebert says. "But what about celebrating the year they went into business themselves? Recognizing that says 'I'm in business too, I know it's hard,' and all of a sudden, you're not just an organization that sends a bill; you've personalized it." Recognition isn't recognition: It's validation. And in the end, that's



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STAY ENGAGED OVER THE LONG HAUL

Recognition for a job well done, an anniversary or a holiday seems pretty simple—but how can you keep growing that relationship over time? Ongoing small efforts are an important part of employee feedback and corporate gifting alike, and once you know what these people value and respond to, all you need to focus on is timing.

For employees, feedback that recognizes performance and value can be ongoing. “The HR trend these days is to celebrate the journey, not just the destination,” Horton says. “This means it’s important to offer employees regular praise and feedback and to tie their work to business outcomes.” Verbal acknowledgements of a job well done and recognition of extra efforts are always important in day-to-day communications. For the long term, managers should look for ways to celebrate milestones such as work anniversaries, important company occasions and company

successes. “This will foster a culture of positivity and help ensure employees know their work matters,” Horton adds.

“Employees want to know how important they are to the company, and that requires emotion,” says Christine Comaford, leadership and development coach at [SmartTribes Institute](#), which provides neuroscience-based strategies for culture, development and performance. “We have to put more emotion in the employer-employee relationship. The most important memories have emotions attached, so the more emotional

you can make the experience, the better the response that helps them feel good. That leads to better employee retention.”

Experts say emotion plays a part in ongoing relationships with clients as well. “Part of the reason for giving a gift occasionally is not just to say thanks,” Oakner says. “It’s to maintain a memorable contact with a client when you’re not working with them on an ongoing basis. Keep your name fresh in the mind of a seasonal client all year long through regular contact, such as a meaningful mailing every quarter.”

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When in doubt, a personal touch never goes amiss when keeping in touch with clients. “It may sound a bit corny, but handwritten notes and personal birthday cards are ways that we stay connected with clients,” says Leanne King, president and CEO of [SeeKing HR](#). “This year I am creating cards for each stakeholder so each person receives a very personalized birthday card from me. I don’t staff this out and I don’t use address labels; everything is done by my hand.” In addition, she offers congratulations when she sees an article about a client, and tries to promote or connect clients and

vendors once a week. “It’s another way to let them know that I am thinking about them,” she says.

“When it comes to sustaining client relationships through corporate gifts, what you’re really saying is that your clients are people, and meaningful gifts help you treat those people better,” Hebert says. “If you think about most relationships with clients, they’re very transactional—after a sale it becomes a matter of accounts payable and receivable. Gifting changes that relationship from transactional to emotional.”



CONCLUSION

Business is all about relationships, whether with clients or employees. Recognizing and celebrating them through regular gifts, notes and in-person feedback can go a long way toward maintaining those relationships, but it also takes something more.

Whatever you give to employees or clients, it must be meaningful and focus on the recipient to inspire true emotion.

Taking that extra step to make your gift meaningful will show the recipient you've done your homework and that you care. "By having a great relationship with employees and clients, it creates a buffer zone for when things go wrong," Hebert says. "It makes you human." ■



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