

Keeping Effective Employees Aboard

Economic troubles have yielded many consequences for natural products stores, but losing valuable employees need not be one of them. ■ By Melissa Kvidahl



Without a doubt, the recent recession has caused natural product stores to cut back and refocus. Throughout this difficult time, storeowners and managers were sometimes preoccupied with simply staying afloat—but this mentality has had some worrisome side effects of its own.

According to a recent WorkInRetail.com survey, conducted between February 10 and March 2, 2010 among 290 retail employers and 731 retail workers, 36 percent of retail workers said it is likely that they will start looking for a new job when the economy picks up. The same amount (36 percent) of employers expressed concern about losing their high-performing workers in the second quarter. “Increased workloads, longer hours and fewer resources related to the recession may be contributing to job dissatisfaction,” said the researchers in a statement. Indeed,

some key factors that employees cited included pay (37 percent were dissatisfied), work/life balance (24 percent were dissatisfied) and career progress (32 percent felt stagnant in their current positions).

Consulting psychologist Bruce D. Sanders, author of *Retailer's Edge*, noted that there is an abundance of quick and easy tactics that retailers can utilize if they're concerned with losing valuable employees; first and foremost, if the store is able, meeting pay expectations is critical. “I'd be lying if I said it is easy and cheap to keep valued employees,” he said. “It's not overly burdensome, but like any other fundamental in running your business, you must devote resources to it. And when it comes to pay and benefits, the employees who will make the most money for your store love a pat on the back, but also expect a pat on the wallet.”

The survey's findings indicated that employers are taking a number of

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steps to ensure that their best employees don't jump ship once the tide turns. Some are investing more in training, offering more flexible work arrangements and promising future raises or promotions. Others are keeping costs in mind by making small adjustments such as offering trips or bonuses, or providing a higher title without a higher salary.

Motivating Factors

According to Robert Caravano, public relations manager at The TSi Company (Teaneck, NJ), provider of employee training and development programs, one of the best ways to retain motivated employees is to feed their need for learning. "Motivated people have an ongoing need for learning," he said. "This accumulation of knowledge and experience is viewed as essential to their opportunity for growth and advancement. Additionally, they see an employer who provides continuous learning opportunities as progressive, with a desire to maintain the highest level of industry competitiveness." This, he said, improves the employee's perception of the company as a good long-term provider of income and security.

Luckily for the natural products retailer, the industry already comes equipped with some tools useful in keeping the most motivated employees.

"Empowering employees with health and medical knowledge is one of the best things natural product retailers can do to motivate their employees," said Michael Salem, president of Vorex (Dallas, TX), a company which provides comprehensive employee management software. "Customer expectations from natural product employees go beyond locating a specific product on a shelf—customers expect, or hope, that the employee will suggest products based on their physical and lifestyle needs. This engagement between an employee and a customer makes the employee more involved in the industry as a whole, and they become more of a consultant impacting people's lives than simple salespeople."

Salem also suggested that managers and storeowners consistently integrate these most valuable workers into the company's decision making process, and reward them for decisions that yield

Retailers who aren't quite sure if their employees are in it for the long haul can begin by asking themselves some quick questions to diagnose the damage.

"First, retailers need to ask themselves if they are happy with their field staff's performance," said The TSi Company's Caravano, who explained that if the manager is unhappy with the employees' performance, then in all likelihood, the employees

are also unhappy.

Vorex's Salem offered the following targeted questions that storeowners or managers can ask themselves, to assess how likely it is that employees may seek other employment:

- Do the employees feel fully challenged or are they bored or underestimated?

- Is the pay scale fair and comparable to other jobs in similar fields or positions?

- Does management

give the employees an opportunity to be part of decision making?

- If offered another but similar job with a similar salary, would the employees consider taking it?

- What would the employees like to see changed at the store or within the management ranks?

After some self-examination, it will be clear to managers if employees are currently happy, or if the store is at risk of losing them.

success. "Top talents are motivated people who are aware of their skills and the benefit they can provide to the company they work for, and they strive for opportunities to expose those skills," he explained. "Making them do typical work without challenging them with decision making will naturally push them to look for other outside opportunities where they can release their talents." According to Salem, this is a tactic that storeowners can implement right now and for little money; it can be as simple as allowing employees to make their own work schedule or developing a welcoming strategy for when a customer walks into the store. "Not only will this motivate them, but it gives management more time to work on other critical matters," he added. "This is not just quick and cheap, but it can actually benefit the retailer's profits."

Along these same lines, Sanders stressed the importance of keeping the work challenging. "Productive employees are the ones you want to keep," he said, "and productive employees are most likely to seek other employment when they feel they're no longer developing their skills."

Retailers are wise to cater their challenges to different employees' needs. For example, Sanders pointed out that some employees' interests may lie with determining which combination of natural

products will best address a customer's distinctive characteristics and needs. This person would not thrive in a supervisory role, and storeowners who assume this may lose one of their most motivated employees. On the other hand, there are employees whose goal is owning their own natural products store, said Sanders. These employees will thrive if given the task of bettering store operations.

Regardless of the type of employee, the natural products industry has a very special motivating factor to offer its retail workers, said Sanders. "Regularly remind staff of the special nature of their work. They're helping people stay physically, intellectually and emotionally healthy, and they're doing it in a way which empowers customers to take responsibility for themselves," he said. "I say to these retailers: Don't assume that your employees will remember this after being told just once. That's not how the human brain works. And to maintain the enthusiasm necessary for you to get the message across, you must continually stay aware yourself of the special importance of what your business is doing." **VR**



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