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Made-to-Order Employee Benefits

Offering tailored and personalized employee perks can help chiropractors with small budgets attract and retain good employees.

By Victoria Houghton

Merge Gupta-Sunderji, MBA, a leadership and workplace communications consultant, recalls how a dental hygienist who worked for one of her clients was concerned that she would not be able to afford the expensive hockey equipment her son needed for hockey camp. "The office sourced out good-quality used equipment for her," she says, "and then, on her 10-year anniversary with the organization, gave it to her instead of the usual catalog gift."

Another client employed a young receptionist who was studying for her college degree. The doctors allowed the receptionist to borrow the office's laptop for her classes, and to use the office photocopier and printer for her assignments. "She felt like they really cared about her success, and worked doubly hard to help them when they needed it," says Gupta-Sunderji.

As small-business owners, many doctors of chiropractic know that it can be difficult to hold on to good employees. Tight budgets and greater responsibilities per employee can fuel increased burnout and turnover in smaller offices. "Benefits are costly, particularly health and retirement benefits," says Carla Vincent, a retired CA who works as a consultant for insurance companies, CAs, doctors and students. "In an economic decline, the high cost of healthcare benefits can often drive the practice bottom line into a crisis."

So, without the financial resources of a larger practice, what options does a small clinic owner have when trying to attract and retain good employees?

More than you think.

Small-Office Advantages

"The benefit of working in a small office is that each employee has the ability to be a star," says Adrian Miller, president of Adrian Miller Sales Training, which provides consulting and performance training for businesses. "In a small working environment, what you do is noticeable and your creative ideas can be heard and incorporated quickly."

But perhaps the greatest benefit chiropractors can offer their employees is the sense of family that the smaller work environment nurtures. "Learn what really matters to each employee, and then find a way to meet that need," advises Gupta-Sunderji. "This highly personalized approach is a great fit for a small organization, and the made-to-fit attitude means that these are benefits the employee could likely not get elsewhere."

Staples 111of Life

In an office where resources are limited, and staff may not receive flexible spending accounts, life insurance or a retirement fund, an employer must get creative. Offering benefits related to the staff's lifestyles and priorities may prove to be effective as well as financially feasible. "Think about where and how your employees spend their money and time on a day-to-day basis. Offer them some relief," advises Miller. This can include discounts at grocery stores or dry cleaners, gasoline reimbursement, an extra day of vacation with pay, and unscheduled time off for child-care or even elderly-care needs. "Providing your employees time or money to take care of these extra responsibilities will go a long way," says Miller. Reevaluate your staff's needs every three to six months, as their priorities and needs may change, and make sure that whatever benefits you give to one employee are available to all employees in equal measure.

Intangible Benefits

While help with financial and daily burdens is always welcomed, there's more to employees than the dollar sign and the to-do list.

Professional Development

"If we look at some of the best-sellers on the bookstands now, they talk about engaging employees and creating enthusiasm," notes Vincent. "That, in my mind, includes creative benefits beyond the paycheck."

Colleen Stanley, chief selling officer of SalesLeadership Inc., a business development consulting firm, believes that demonstrating your confidence in employees' abilities and professional goals is the best way to motivate them. Stanley suggests involving staff in areas of the business that deviate from their official job responsibilities. For example, if your receptionist wants to improve her public-speaking skills, let her participate in a health fair. "People love to feel they are an integral part of the office," says Stanley.

She also suggests offering educational opportunities to employees—send them to seminars or provide them with a set of DVDs on customer service, marketing, etc. "Don't let their titles hinder their abilities. You may be amazed by their insight, and you might discover super talent right in your backyard."

Humor and Fun

“Aim to hit the fun quota every day,” says Stanley. Take your staff to dinner occasionally or perhaps end the week with a movie. When appropriate, look for the humor in office headaches or other stressful issues. “People are attracted to and stay with organizations that work hard and play hard. If you’re just working and don’t include that personal side, true teamwork will never happen,” she adds. (Keep in mind, however, that workers’ comp and liability laws apply to anything considered a work function, such as a dinner or off-site meeting. Any incidents or injuries that occur at the event, or in transportation to and from the event, are subject to such laws.)

Appreciation

Stanley remembers once meeting with a commercial real estate broker who had just received a huge commission check. “I thought this guy should be jumping up and down,” says Stanley. “Instead, he said, ‘It would sure be nice if the president walked down here and shook my hand for a job well done.’ He was looking for the human factor. Many times, organizations forget the basics: appreciation, recognition and feeling important.”

Miller agrees and suggests implementing recognition programs that reward hard work. This can be accomplished by presenting plaques and designating an employee of the month. “This is important because employers are going to start to see more workers from Generation Y (born between 1982 and 1997), which grew up with a lot of support and recognition. It’s a much more nurtured generation, and employers need to recognize that.”

Vincent has also learned that nothing goes as far as a sincere “thank you” for a job well done. “Do it in a nice card, hand-signed and mailed to their home,” she suggests.

Employee Input

When creating a personalized benefits package, involve employees in choosing the perks. “You can survey them,” says Miller. “Actually ask them what they need, worry about and want.” Or ask them to submit ideas through a suggestion box. “You can put together a list of the suggestions and [create] a cafeteria plan. People can then select what is most appropriate for them,” she says.

“Ask them for their opinions,” adds Stanley. “What experiences do they want to have, and what goals do they want to achieve in their professional lives? What’s the one thing at the end of the day that they’re too tired to do? What keeps them from spending time with their family?”

“The benefits have to be things that employees want—not what you think they want,” notes Vincent. To illustrate her point, Vincent recalls a doctor who promised a four-day trip to Bermuda if staff met his productivity goals. Surprisingly, the goals were never met. As it turns out, the staff was not disappointed; it was later revealed that most of them didn’t really want to go to Bermuda. “One didn’t want to go without her husband, another would have preferred cash, and two more revealed that, although they liked working with each other, they didn’t really want to vacation together. The moral? Make sure the staff wants the reward.”

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