

10 hot gifts on employees' holiday wish lists



The year-end holiday bonus is alive and well, with 72% of employers issuing them last winter and dollar amounts inching upward as the economy continues its recovery.

But padding December paychecks isn't the only way an organization can say "Happy Holidays!" to hard-working employees.

Even though most employees who responded to year-end surveys last year said they hoped their employers would stuff their holiday stockings with cash bonuses, they also said they valued extra time off and modest-but-useful gifts.

If your business won't issue holiday bonuses this year, consider giving another gift that employees will appreciate nearly as much.

Here are 10 alternatives to Christmas cash:

1. Offer extra paid time off. Free up a half day for each employee to spend shopping and running holiday errands. Close up early on Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve. Or surprise everyone with an extra day or two off before Christmas or between the two holidays without counting it against their regular vacation time.

2. Close for the holidays. About 12% of companies shut down between Christmas and New Year's Day last year. Some offered the paid week off to employees as a bonus on top of regular vacation time. Others required workers to spend regular vacation days to "pay" for the break.

3. Hand out gift cards for something that employees would buy anyway—like dinner and a movie. Some organizations issue grocery store gift cards in an amount sufficient to cover the cost of a good-sized turkey or even a full Christmas dinner.

Tip: Don't buy gift cards that restrict what employees buy. A grocery store card that is good only for a Christmas turkey, for instance, is of little use to employees who are vegetarians, don't celebrate Christmas or spend the holidays at someone else's house.

4. Give each employee an inexpensive gift. Even if you can't afford a \$20 gift card for the whole staff, give everyone *something*. Tie a bright ribbon around a small box of chocolates. Pick out an inexpensive business book. Give something that your company (or one of your clients) makes.

5. Encourage managers to give. Have them personally select a gift for each member of his or her team—something that the supervisor knows will be meaningful.

A thoughtful gift—like a book, a gift card to an employee’s favorite clothing store or a bottle of an employee’s favorite wine—tells the employee that the boss cares about him or her as a person.

6. Have the big boss say “Thanks!” Small-group lunches with the president or division head can go a long way toward improving morale in the New Year.

Ask the CEO to stroll through the office or plant for a personal thank you and quick conversations with employee can feel like a gift to workers who like to know their efforts are appreciated. For those who work off-site, have execs send personal thank-you notes.

7. Make a grand gesture. If the organization is about to make a major change that will improve the lot of its employees, time the announcement to coincide with the holidays.

Here’s an extreme example: The aging founder of Sawbones, a Washington company that makes artificial bones for medical use, assembled his staff in the company cafeteria on Dec. 10 three years ago—and gave them the company.

The same thing happened in Bemidji, Minn., and Wahpeton, N.D., last Christmas, when the 70-year-old owner of Lueken’s Village Foods gave two stores to his 400 employees.

In both cases, the bosses set up an Employee Stock Ownership Program to make the exchange.

8. Give the gift of health. Surprise each employee with a health club membership, even if it’s company-paid for just a few months. Other health-related gifts: Pay for smoking-cessation courses, Weight Watchers meetings or other health-promoting events.

9. Wrap up some technology. If your employees are using their own cellphones for business, consider handing out company-owned phones or tablets—carrier service included.

If your organization is big enough, you’ll be able to negotiate bulk discounts on the hardware and the Internet service.

Bonus: This practical perk ensures that all your employees have the same equipment and the latest upgrades to help them do their jobs more efficiently.

10. Hold a drawing. Include enough prizes for everyone to receive something. Along with restaurant, movie and coffeehouse gift cards, mix in two or three extravagant awards—like a resort vacation for two, two plane tickets or a long weekend at a hotel.

Other ideas: coupons for discounts at local retailers and sports or concert tickets.

Throw in your own coupons that entitle the winner to flextime, a professional conference registration, a day off to volunteer or a one-on-one session with the company’s financial planner.