



... with the award they would choose for themselves.

What Incentive or Recognition Award to Use?

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Whether it's old age setting in or just a little nostalgia, I often find myself thinking back to my early days in the industry and contemplating how things have or haven't changed. I see articles written on subjects that aren't really different from what was said many years ago. It's almost as if we just dust off old philosophies and restate them in today's terms and for today's audience. One thing's for certain, the philosophy of why and how to motivate performance hasn't changed much. The tenets and rules we used in the 60's and 70's are just as valid today as they were then...and in some cases even more so. Have generational changes brought us back to the future?

I suppose the single biggest change I've seen in the industry is the use of technology and the internet. I marvel at the things we can do today that were inconceivable a few short years ago. I don't suppose many of you remember the term "last flight out?" Those of us who had to rush a presentation to the airport by 9:00 PM in order to catch the last flight to Chicago for a very important meeting the next day, certainly do!

So what does all this reminiscing have to do with choosing what incentive or recognition award to use? Everything! With the technology change and the internet we have an array of awards to choose from today that is seemingly endless. Traditional merchandise catalogs are still with us but are mainly online, and I would argue somewhat obsolete. The categories of items themselves haven't changed much in over fifty years.

To the antiquated merchandise catalog, the industry has added credit cards, debit cards, all types of individual travel options, air ticketing, event ticketing, lifestyle awards from riding in a hot air balloon to flying a jet plane, and of course the ubiquitous gift card! Through research done by the industry and reviewed in this publication, gift cards, for the last several years have been and continue to be the #1 award in the industry.

Over the years numerous clients have asked me the same question, and I'm sure they've asked it of most of the other sales folks in the industry as well. ***What is the best award to use to motivate or recognize performance?*** My first answer to that question was always deluxe travel. I think it is by far the most appealing, motivational and memorable award we have in the industry. However it is not always practical and the per-person budget to run a successful travel program will preclude you from allowing most of your participants to earn the award. Thus your program may not motivate the vast majority of your people and you may not achieve the goals set. Certainly those who went on the trip achieved goals (usually) but what happened to those who "lost?"

When travel was not feasible, the answer I gave to that question of the best award to use is the same today as it was in the early 70's...give your participants what they want. Flippant? Maybe, but I believed then as I believe now, that when you design your program around what your participants truly want, and not what you think they want, or what you want them to have or what your supplier wants to sell you, you will have a more successful program. Of course if you asked the participants what they want, they will invariably tell you...CASH! The industry has researched that subject for years and come up with great reasoning why cash is not a good incentive award. It's a timeless topic we will discuss in future articles.



Studies by American Express Incentive Services and several others I have seen along the way have concluded that what your participants really want is choice...the ability to make their own selection from as wide a range of awards as possible. The American Express findings a few years back showed that 72% of respondents preferred personal shopping to catalog shopping simply because of the choice, value, and ease. This is a trend I've seen for several years now, and actually when we give our clients redemption options that include debit or gift cards along with merchandise, participants chose the card option by as much as 96%.

The Problems of Being in a Recession

When deciding what award to use in your incentive or recognition effort, put yourself in the shoes of your participants and determine the award from their point of view. It won't always be what you think they want or should have. When you give them what they want, (within reason) your chance of motivating them to a higher level of performance greatly increases.

During a recessionary period it is even more important to consider what awards to use. The best value to your participants should be an important consideration when making this selection. Some companies are reluctant to use awards that may be dollar denominated (gift cards, debit cards etc.) but your participants may have a much different viewpoint.

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Email: LeyB@awardemployees.com