

# internal marketing

## Innovative Team-Building and Staff Retention Strategies

BY JUDITH NITSCH, P.E., LEED® AP, FSMPS, CPSM

*Editor's Note: The SMPS Listserv can be the source of good "conversations" and idea-sharing among SMPS members. The topic of innovative team-building and staff retention strategies was one topic that recently caught our attention. After a call for authors, Judy Nitsch happily volunteered to pursue the subject and author the following piece.*

Spread out all of your firm's external marketing pieces on a table and see what visual message patterns appear. At a minimum, a consistent look and feel is probably apparent.

Now spread out your firm's *internal* publications, and what messaging appears? Oops! I'd bet—as happened with our firm last year—consistency is lax and the messaging is disjointed. As marketers we spend a lot of time shaping the message we want our firms to send to our external audiences, both clients and prospects, yet we ignore the messaging to the primary conveyors of our firm's external messaging: our fellow employees.

How can we expect them to drive home the brand when we're not consistently exposing them to it?

First of all, our firms need to make the internal audiences as much of a priority as are clients and prospects. That means the employee handbook, internal memos, etc. need to conform to the same visual standards as an external publication. How do we do this? By convincing our human resources managers and principals that marketing can help with staff recruitment and retention. After all, many firms are finding staff recruitment to be a number one priority. Marketing's job will be easier if more employees are able to articulate the features and benefits of our firms and develop better client relationships.

So what other innovative activities are firms engaged in to motivate and retain staff and build brand internally?

### Keep employees informed

About two years ago, **TSP** merged several sister firms into one company—150 people in 7 offices in 5 states. The firm needed to



PHOTO: PROVIDED BY RESOURCE INTERNATIONAL

Three Amigos: Have fun with your theme! At Resource International, employees received the Spanish version of the breakfast invitation one day and the English translation the next morning.

develop communication among staff members in different offices. In December 2006, TSP unveiled its new Intranet: TSPortal. Now, every time an employee opens the Internet, the firm's Intranet comes up.

The goals of the TSP Intranet site are to:

- improve corporate communications, with HR materials, training materials, and the employee handbook
- make life easier for staff, creating convenient access to HR forms, phone numbers for insurance or 401(k) vendors, wellness reimbursement forms, etc.
- increase interaction between staff members and create a unified vision
- represent the firm's culture and be the foundation of the internal brand

The IT, HR, and Marketing staff organized the Intranet. TSP purchased a Web site development tool for approximately \$3,000. Staff time was spent to develop and implement the site and revise the existing employee handbook. The firm recently added a half-time staff member to maintain the site and add new pages and elements. One interesting result is that the Intranet fostered employee feedback to upper management.

### Hold an annual planning session

**Rolf Jensen & Associates, Inc.** (RJA) holds an off-site planning meeting to establish goals and objectives for the coming year.

## “Employees love a friendly environment, not just money.”

RJA believes that including all employees—from the principals to the receptionists—in the planning is a team-building experience. In addition to a SWOT [Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats] analysis, team-building activities are implemented by **Phyllis K. Boyea, CPSM**. The exercises are interjected throughout the day to break up the meeting.

Boyea’s favorite activity on which to end involves everyone standing in a circle with one person holding a ball of yarn. That person either makes a statement or says one word about the day. They hold the end of the string and toss the ball of yarn to anyone else in the circle. The next person follows suit, with each person holding on to their piece of the string and tossing the ball on to another. At the end, there is a big network of string. It is explained that this *network* is what connects the employees, even if they work in different offices, and through this *network* they will keep open communication and accomplish the goals planned.

### Encourage a conversation with the principal

When **David Eckard** was with **Urban Engineers** in Philadelphia, the firm had a “Lunch with the President” program for all new hires. The lunches were held several times per year depending on the number of recently hired individuals—typically 8 to 12 new hires and the firm’s president, Ed D’Alba. The goal was to give D’Alba a chance to meet the new hires and to give them a chance to interact with him in an informal setting.

The guests would introduce themselves and share where they came from, their educational background, what they were responsible for at Urban, etc. D’Alba would discuss his history with the Urban organization, the corporate quality policy and ISO certification, an overview of the strategic plan and goals,

and reinforce to the new hires that he was always available if they needed to speak with him. D’Alba provided an opportunity for the new hires to ask questions and offer any feedback or comments they might have.

Because it is a commonly held belief that new hires evaluate their future longevity with a firm within the first six months, a follow-up session was held a few months later for the same group. The second session was more of a discussion of everyone’s experience being a new part of Urban and allowed for additional questions and feedback.

Since D’Alba has an incredible knack for exuding energy and enthusiasm, the participants took away a heightened sense of motivation, purpose, and pride in their new firm. It was a rewarding experience for all involved.

Eckard reports, “I think the only thing I might have done differently would be to have representatives of marketing, accounting, and HR present to provide brief overviews (or even handouts) of how these departments support the employees, and who should be contacted in the event of a problem or question—benefits, expense reports, project billing, proposals, adding someone to the corporate mailing list, etc.”

### Provide mentoring

**Leigh Mires**, principal of **Walter P Moore**, reports that the Walter P Moore Mentoring Program is targeted to new graduate engineers. Provided with a *team* of mentors, the new employee is equipped with abundant resources to help make a smooth transition from college into the world of work.

The purpose of the program is four-fold: integrate new graduate engineers more quickly, help them understand the company culture, help them climb the technical learning curve, and increase employee retention. It is run by the Training Department integrated with the New Hire Orientation Program. A training specialist serves as the program coordinator, overseeing new mentor training, mentor/protégé assignment, and protégé evaluation at three- and six-month intervals.

Because of these evaluations, the firm is able to track the new graduate engineer’s complete “onboarding” experience and job satisfaction through this transitional phase. Evaluation results show that the new hire’s job satisfaction remains high through the first six months, even when it is expected to dip due to normal transition challenges (e.g., learning curve, etc.). When asked what she’d do differently, Mires responded, “I would probably find more ways to celebrate the good job the mentors do on a daily basis working with their protégés.”

## Hold team-building events

**Resource International** organizes an event with two team-building activities for employees. The first activity involves dividing into teams to build the tallest structure with marshmallows and dry spaghetti. The second activity is building a themed structure out of pipe cleaners. This year's theme was "transportation devices;" teams built everything from a rocket, to a train, to a grocery cart. Each member of the winning team received a prize selected from a variety of themed gift baskets worth \$25. Every attendee received a mug containing candy and lottery tickets; six of those mugs also included gift certificates. **Linda Collins**, senior marketing coordinator, organized the event with help from an accounting staff member. The three-hour event, held from 4:00 to 7:00 pm, cost \$2,000, including supplies, prizes, and catering.

**Paul Klassen** of **C.H. Guernsey & Company** used to work for AOL's main corporate office as a remote/telecommuter employee. About once a year, AOL would fly all of its employees to its Virginia headquarters for team building. He shared, "One exercise for team building really stood out for me." Teams of a six to eight were gathered together in a large room. One member of each team was blindfolded and placed in a circle of colored sponges. The sponges were worth different points, with some worth negative points. One person kept score, and the remaining team members had to work together to coach the blindfolded person to pick up sponges to achieve the highest score, without touching the sponges worth negative points. "It involved teaching us how to work together and how to give specific, accurate directions... [with] a lot of background confusion due to the noise of the other teams."

## Make play serious

In her search to make work more satisfying and productive, **Donna Denio** of the **Center for Balance by Design** became connected with the LEGO Serious Play ([www.seriousplay.com](http://www.seriousplay.com)) process. Denio reports that the process, which uses LEGO bricks, has immediate and sustainable results to enhance team performance and release team innovation and creativity. Team members build a response to a series of challenges and share stories that surface both aspirations and concerns. After a series of individual challenges, teams negotiate a collective response by combining key elements of their individual constructions into a single model. Participants also develop a summary list of Simple Guiding Principles to consult when making team decisions.

The participants in the interactive exercises can be the office leadership team; an emerging-leader team; a team charged with a certain mission; a multi-disciplined, project-based team; or the entire office.

## Need more ideas?

Here are a few other sources and activities to bring to your office:

- contact [www.teambuildersinc.com](http://www.teambuildersinc.com)
- create a scavenger hunt
- hold a "Guess Whose Baby Photo" Contest (This is hard on us older folks who were born before color photos were prevalent!)
- display employee artwork
- have a Thanksgiving potluck
- hold a "Best Dessert" eat-off

Whatever the activity, maximizing participation and having fun are keys for success.

The workshops range from four hours to two days. The cost depends on the timeframe and the number of participants. Models, aspirations, and challenges are documented in annotated model photographs and a DVD video presentation so workshop participants can re-connect with the energy generated by reviewing documentation of the workshop activities.

**HMFH Architects** and **ADD Inc.** have each worked with the process to help their leadership teams coalesce and identify barriers to success.

## Insert some fun into the day

To celebrate Cinco de Mayo, one office of **Gilmore & Associates** held a Chili Cook-off and Mexican Feast. Staff members were invited to enter their chili in the contest; 12 participated, and their entries were judged on overall taste. After the judging, everyone was able to sample the chili entries, and they were treated to Mexican dishes for lunch. The winner received a \$50 gift certificate to a local Mexican restaurant. Organized by the Marketing Department, the cost was approximately \$600, which included drinks, paper products, the gift certificate, decorations, and Mexican food. Marketing manager **Kristi Zoll** reports, "Due to the overwhelming response this year, we expect to get more participants in the next cook-off!"

**Bryant Associates** kicks off the baseball season by having a Red Sox Opening Day Party. Staff is asked to bring in ballpark-themed food and to wear their baseball gear. Marketing manager **Kristen Kelley** started and organizes the event. A \$25 cash prize is awarded to the best-dressed employee. Her tip: Create a menu and ask employees to sign up to bring specific items so you don't end up with 10 bags of chips!

**Nitsch Engineering** hosts a number of unusual events: a summer outing organized by an employee committee; touring the city as a group on a trolley or by a boat on the river, looking at the firm's projects along the way; and celebrating the firm's anniversary. Ice cream sundae parties are always a hit too. We first did the Brigham's Big Dig® Sundae Party (which cost less than \$5 per person) about 10 years ago. Now we pick up ice cream and all the fixings at the grocery store for about \$60. Employees love it!

**Hargis Engineers** organized a Putt-Putt Miniature Golf Tournament that spanned two floors in its office. Employees, as teams or individuals, were invited to develop one of the nine holes for the course and then to form foursomes to play. The teams played during the lunch hour over a three-day period. Prizes were awarded based on best score and most creative hole design. Marketer **Shannon McLaughlin** reports, "In an engineering office with a number of avid golfers, this was a great success to engage a large cross-section of employees and encouraged others to participate in the fun as course fans."

### Involve families

Part of **Hargis Associates'** employee retention strategy is creating an environment that fosters camaraderie and a personal connection among peers. Over the past five years, the marketing department has taken a more active leadership role in defining, scheduling, and coordinating these events to streamline the planning process, support budgetary objectives, help develop events reflective of the firm's diverse demographics, and reinforce Hargis' brand.

Hargis Associates' annual picnic includes the chance to dunk five nominated principals in a dunk tank for a nominal fee. All funds raised support a local charity. Free caricatures and face painting keep the children engaged throughout the day.

The firm's Holiday Party is a long-standing event. An in-house team develops 15 minutes of entertainment and tabletop ice breakers to help foster conversation. Icebreakers include modified versions of Mad Libs and Taboo, based on Hargis characters and common terminology. The firm observed that, over the past four years as the event has transitioned from a luncheon into a dinner and structured activities were introduced, the guests are socializing more and relying less on the entertainment to spark conversation. The firm experiences 98% employee participation at both events.

For Hargis Night at the Movies, the firm rented a local venue that features a 100-seat theater, a large lounge area, a bar, and multiple "living-room" environments for smaller groups to socialize casually. The firm provided its own DVDs, selected by the employees via an online voting process. While the double feature

and catered food were the highlights of the evening, Hargis was impressed by how the space supported the team building that took place outside the theater. Several individuals stayed for the full four hours but never stepped foot in the theater as they were fully engaged in conversation in the other spaces throughout the venue. This event had 60% employee participation.


### Remember the value of simple recognition

The best recognition an employee can receive is a public "thank you!" said in front of other employees. Here are some additional morale-boosting tips from **Ron Worth, CAE, FSMPS, CPSM**, chief executive officer of **SMPS**.

- Relax the office dress code periodically.
- Present an "Oscar-like" statue to staff members for outstanding service or going "above and beyond."
- Take the team out for breakfast or lunch as a reward; sometimes more than just one individual deserves recognition.
- Have an office lunch on staff members' birthdays; let them select the menu.
- Recognize staff at significant employment anniversaries with a modest gift.

**Resource International** has monthly breakfasts for all staff to build morale. Senior marketing coordinator **Linda Collins** reports that two or three different people "host" breakfast, which means they have to figure out what to provide and how to prepare and serve it. In May, the firm held "Breakfast with the Three Amigos," serving banana burritos. The cost of the breakfast averages about \$30–50 per event. (See invitation on page 13.)

### Be spontaneous

**EDI, Ltd.**, found that a good round of bowling gets a lot accomplished. According to **Kevin Hebblethwaite**, "Rolling heavy round objects at wooden pins is much safer than throwing them at your colleagues in the office." 



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Judith Nitsch, P.E., LEED® AP, FSMPS, CPSM**, is president of Nitsch Engineering ([www.nitscheng.com](http://www.nitscheng.com)), a civil engineering, land surveying, transportation engineering, planning, and GIS services firm based in Boston, MA. Judy can be reached at 617.338.0063, x212, or at [jnitsch@nitscheng.com](mailto:jnitsch@nitscheng.com). This is her first contribution to *Marketer*.