



Please Skip the Carrots

Jim Dittman / President / Dittman Incentive Marketing Corp.

The carrot has become the ubiquitous symbol of the incentive industry. We have allowed ourselves to be defined by a vegetable.

How did we ever let this happen?

The carrot-and-stick idiom puts a farmer on the back of a donkey with a carrot placed forward of the animal and intended to be the incentive for the donkey to walk. If it doesn't do the job, the stick works at the other end. To make anything in this scene analogous to the performance improvement profession is to insult the practitioners and participants alike.

The words and symbols we use when discussing our business both affect and reflect how we feel about what we do and for whom we do it. When we use a symbol like the carrot, we shape others' perceptions in a way that oversimplifies the nature of the service we provide and understate our importance to the economy. The carrot reduces a complex, powerful, nuanced marketing and human resources strategy to a simple reward-and-punishment tactic.

The carrot is a simple idea. A properly designed performance improvement strategy is not, and nor is it a simple process. While it's not neurosurgery, it does involve a thoughtful gap analysis, a clear-headed articulation of objectives, identification of key performance indicators, establishment of baseline performance, definition and analysis of ROI and ROO, and translation of all this into a program architecture that influences behavior toward the objectives.

Reward and recognition programs translate corporate values into action plans and move people to live those values and to recognize their teammates who are doing likewise. And the creation of these programs calls for a whole-brain approach with knowledge of human motivation principles as well as persuasive communications and precise math skills.

Delivering Emotional Gratification

Perhaps the carrot should be replaced with a big, broad smile. Those of us in the performance improvement business have the joyful job of giving people a reason to exceed themselves...to learn and to grow. And when they do, it feeds their self-esteem and produces great smiles of satisfaction. We then get to layer more smiles when we deliver lifetime travel memories, brand-name merchandise, personal awards, and, most importantly, the appreciation and recognition intended by the client.

Carrots influence short-term behavior. Performance improvement programs effect permanent attitudinal changes that lead to permanent behavioral changes. Values-based programs help both internal and customer-facing employees understand the external brand promise and their roles in delivering it.

As we continue to claw our way back out of this deep recession, it is all too easy to forget the importance of winning the war for talent. We think the best people won't leave because "they're happy to have a job." When we return to the traditional 5 percent unemployment level that most economists consider to be full

employment, the companies that lose sight of the importance of recognition and rewards will be watching their people stream for the exits in search of opportunities.

Programs that are based on stimulus response will work for the short term. But the initiatives that truly effect permanent change will be organically grown, taking into account the uniqueness of the company's workforce and its challenges at hand. Additionally, they will touch all the critical points in the value chain. The power of sales and channel incentives multiplies when those who have to deliver the goods (the brand promise) know their roles and buy into the program because they live in a culture of recognition and rewards.

Leveraging Personal Aspirations

We all aspire. Some to acquire. Others to be more today than they were yesterday. Either way, it is our job to help people, to arm them, inspire them, and motivate them by working with their desire to succeed, not to intimidate them through fear of failure. Our tone of voice in all communications must be personal and respectful. Our messaging must pass the "pompous test." The goals we set must be reachable but must force people to reach for them. We must help managers be better managers by making it easy for them to recognize and reward people. We must give people opportunities to earn things they value.

Why must we do these things? Because it's the right thing to do. And because it's the smart thing to do. The only competitive advantage that endures is the commitment of a talented and engaged workforce—in other words, getting people to want to do what you need them to do.