

During COVID, holiday gift-giving can be HR's 'time to shine'

Remote workers could use a reminder of their employers' appreciation this holiday season.

By: Carol Patton | November 5, 2020



(Getty images)

Undoubtedly, COVID-19 will force many employers to abandon their traditional holiday parties this year, prompting some HR leaders to shift their attention to employee gifts. What types of gifts can better connect remote workers to each other and the organization while helping to build the company's brand?

Think caring. Think cozy. Think creative. Employee gifts have become more personalized this year, says Leo Friedman, CEO at iPromo, an online promotions, products and corporate gift-giving company.

"We're seeing cozy blankets and [apparel] like sweaters and robes and heated mugs that are super-popular," he says, explaining that, via a Bluetooth connection, the mugs keep

beverages at a desired, set temperature. “The fact that we already have so many orders for plants also surprised me.”

With more room in their holiday budgets without expensive company parties, many organizations are instead spending on employee gifts. At iPromo, the amount has climbed by double digits this year. So far, Friedman says, the average spend per gift by employers with more than 500 employees falls between \$25 and \$35; 100 to 500 employees is \$50 to \$70; and small companies, under 100 employees, exceeds \$100.

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He says any employee touchpoint, especially on a broad spectrum during a pandemic, acts as a reflection of a company’s values. Thoughtful gifts tend to make a big splash toward connecting remote employees and expressing the company’s caring and gratitude.

Consider empowering department heads to select specific gifts for staff, he says. Although a universal gift like a branded blanket may be a no-brainer, he says, HR should take pains to avoid appearing tone-deaf.

“Ask department heads to choose a gift that makes the most sense for their department like a power bank [to recharge cell phones] for sales professionals who travel,” Friedman says. “If you give something that makes no sense to a team or doesn’t gel well, it’s really just a waste of money.”

Gift-giving is an art, he adds. Get creative. A good example is Rouxbe, an online culinary school that enables employees to select a three-course meal—including cocktails—from its menu. Individuals then receive a box of ingredients the day of their company’s virtual party or a gift card to their local grocery store.

If Americans are still battling COVID-19 next year, Friedman believes corporate and holiday gifts will focus on wellness. Some companies have already started giving yoga mats to employees or phone sanitizer boxes at \$30 to \$40 apiece.

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Community giving is another area where employers can stand out over the holidays—and one where traditional strategies are being impacted by the pandemic, as businesses

seek to adapt their philanthropic strategies to keep employees safe while still supporting the communities they serve.

“They’re seeing how deeply hurt the world is, both economically and [health-wise],” says Scott Cawood, CEO of WorldatWork, a membership organization focused on attracting, motivating and retaining employees. “The unique thing now is that the categories of how they’re giving have broadened.”

Instead of employees congregating for large group volunteer events over the holidays, for instance, Cawood says, companies can encourage smaller, individual volunteer projects. WorldatWork employees, he noted, are delivering meals to in-home cancer patients and transporting produce to local food pantries.

Many companies are also reimagining giving. Cawood points to Nike, which is providing sneakers to healthcare workers, while Nordstrom repurposed its alterations teams to make masks for essential workers. Others are offering virtual skills training to employees at nonprofits.

Even well-known charities are changing tactics to enable corporations and their workforce to donate safely this holiday season. A good example is the Marine Toys for Tots program, which partnered with DonateAToy.org to launch a virtual holiday toy drive.

“No matter what kind of position you find yourself in as you navigate through COVID-19, there’s an opportunity to instill generosity in what you’re doing,” he says. “It gives [employees] a different focus, even for a few moments a day, facilitates our recovery and bounceback, and balances out the negativity.”

However, all employers, says Cawood, need to emphasize the importance of taking care of one another. HR can craft strong messaging about the different ways in which the organization is helping its workforce, customers and community.

Meanwhile, company values are being tested. Employers are under pressure to be productive, viable and, hopefully, help others do the same. In addition, he says, they need to think about what they’re good at, how their organization can positively impact future phases of this pandemic and revisit their core values, which could prove more meaningful during this health and economic crisis.

“Look for what solutions you’re naturally able to give,” says Cawood. “If you miss this part of the equation, there will be a response from your community and employees later on about what you did to help during COVID.”