

Gift Cards: Shop 'til You Drop

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Turn this unique reward into a high-energy team-building event



In many incentive travel programs, exit surveys suggest shopping, not golf, tennis or spa, is the most popular recreation option. Consequently, it's not surprising that shopping is a preferred activity in an increasing number of employee recognition, reward and company bonding programs.

While happily clicking through an online awards catalog for a prize is convenient, and redeeming a gift card with a family member is enjoyable and rewarding, nothing quite compares to the fun, fist-pumping excitement of a shopping spree with fellow employees. It provides participants with an experience that appeals to a wide variety of tastes and desires, creating an exciting bonding activity and turning gift cards into truly experiential rewards.

Many major malls, big box stores and department stores have "shopping concierges," "personal shopping assistants" or someone else on staff who can help coordinate a shopping spree event. The programs can range from a brief shopping sojourn over a long lunch break to an all-day, gift card redeeming extravaganza accented by gourmet dining, a spa experience and professional fashion and shopping consultation. Moreover, for those seeking an even more intense, hyper-shopping experience, how about a warehouse dash in a sea of TVs, golf equipment, luggage and other desirable items

Jean Therapy

Laura Beck, managing director of the Austin, Texas, office of Porter Novelli, an international public relations firm, recently designed a creative employee reward program for young staffers who had undergone a particularly grueling three-month stretch that included lots of overtime and pro bono work. To reward her committed overachievers, who, Beck surmised, have amazing "work genes," she coordinated a "designer jeans shopping spree" at Nordstrom in Austin, staged during a one-and-a-half-hour lunchtime.

Arrangements were made with Nordstrom to reserve dressing rooms, provide bottled water and assign a personal shopper to accompany and advise the group. The 16 employees (13 women and three men) each selected a pair of designer jeans that ranged in price from \$150 to \$180. "My idea was to give them the opportunity to

purchase a small luxury that they normally wouldn't buy with their own money," says Beck. "A couple of interesting things happened that made the overall experience successful. It turned out to be a great bonding experience among the staff, with lots of laughs. The men's jeans were a bit less expensive, so the women were able to benefit and spend a little more. That really helped bonding."

Game On

Looking for the ultimate, high-energy, in-your-face shopping experience where every second counts, as do strategy and savvy? The "Warehouse Dash," an incentive-reward program by Chicago-based Hinda Incentives, has all those elements and more.

Hinda has its own warehouse stocked with the merchandise that motivates clients to go above and beyond. Hinda clients like ADP, a payroll outsourcing firm, use the warehouse for an additional reward in their programs.

"Organizationally, we do a number of things, including president's clubs and travel incentives, but the Warehouse Dash is one of our best programs," says John Gleason, corporate VP of sales for employees at ADP, based in Roseland, N.J.

The event begins with a dinner the night before the dash. Then in the morning, prior to shopping, participants get hyped and focused with a celebrity-style, red-carpet entry dominated by a thunderous ovation from staff members followed by a greeting from cheerleaders while pulsating background music provided by a DJ plays.

Participants have 30 minutes to scope out the warehouse Hinda uses to store merchandise for incentive award fulfillment, formulating a strategy and examining items in electronics, sporting goods, household products, toys, golf equipment and anything else requested by the client, such as large-format televisions. Typically, each award winner is allotted between \$5,000 and \$10,000, and the average size group is between 10 and 20, according to Alisa Schafer, Hinda's director of marketing.

The dash time limit is usually 60 seconds. "It's amazing how intense and excited the participants get before the start," says Schafer. Fellow dashers and onlookers cheer participants as they run through the aisles, each pushing a large cart and frantically filling it with as many items as they choose until the final horn.

A Holiday Hit

A couple of years ago, Aaron Witsoe, president of Creative Business Resources in Phoenix, Ariz., a professional employee organization that provides human resources outsourcing, was looking for a way to reward his employees at the end of the year. He knew if he gave them cash, the majority would predictably pay off bills or buy a gift for somebody else. "I wanted to find a way for them to spend money on themselves," says Witsoe, who created a unique shopping spree at one of Phoenix's largest malls for a group of 20 employees.

"We met for lunch near the mall," says Witsoe. "Everybody was told to wear comfortable shoes, and for all they knew, they were just going to have lunch in comfortable shoes." At the end of the meal, Witsoe surprised everyone by telling them they would receive \$150 to spend in 90 minutes at the mall. "The catch was

they had to buy something for themselves, and they were required to bring back the receipts for proof and they had to return any cash that was not spent," says Witsoe.

The group met back at the restaurant and the real fun began. "It was very impromptu, and each person spoke about their purchases," says Witsoe. "From the lady with Victoria's Secret purchases to the guy who bought a drill, the stories were hilarious." Additional \$25 gift card prizes were awarded to the shoppers with the "most unique," "most suitable for that individual," "most outrageous" and "most practical" purchases. Later in the evening, the employees were joined by their spouses and significant others for even more laughs and camaraderie.

Witsoe says the holiday shopping spree event complements the company's holiday bonus program. "The shopping event is a terrific bonding experience, and it makes employees really feel appreciated, because, in the end, they go home with a reward that is personal and was shared with their fellow employees," says Witsoe.

Mall MVPs

Increasingly, upscale malls are offering shopping programs that encompass a wide variety of services and experiences. For example, The Mall at Millenia, in Orlando, Fla., with nearly 150 shops and restaurants, including Neiman Marcus, Macy's and Bloomingdale's, features the "Millenia Experience," which encompasses one-on-one image consultation, personal shopping, valet service and VIP treatment at the center's most upscale retailers. The mall offers personal shopping expertise from Melanie Pace, an authority on the latest trends and recurring fashion expert on iVillage Live. The consultation includes tips on finding clothes that work best for an individual's body type and advice on simple wardrobe tricks, as well as ways to enjoy the overall wardrobe shopping experience when they return home.

The mall's personal shopper then puts visitors' newfound knowledge into practice during a personal shopping session at the mall's most luxurious retailers, followed by a customized makeup lesson at MAC Cosmetics. To round out the exclusive experience, also included in the "Millenia Experience" package is a \$1,000 Mall at Millenia gift card, \$150 for lunch at one of the mall's popular dining establishments, such as P.F. Chang's China Bistro, The Cheesecake Factory or Brio Tuscan Grille, and finally, a cocktail at Blue Martini, the mall's entertainment lounge, to complete the full day of events.

The "Millenia Experience" package is priced from \$1,900 (which includes the \$1,000 Mall at Millenia gift card) and can be customized for groups of two or more (www.MallatMillenia.com). Other half-day and shorter shopping experiences are also available.