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Time off is great summer staff motivator

By JOYCE M. ROSENBERG

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Thousands of lucky employees at small businesses across the country won't be working this Friday afternoon, or maybe they'll have the whole day off. Many small business owners looking to keep staffers motivated this summer give workers what they really want -- time away from the office.

Owners do have other ways of motivating staffers in the summer, by catering breakfasts or lunches or sponsoring picnics, trips to museums and other social events. The point is to help make working during the summer more palatable, and, more important, to boost morale in a way that will result in increased productivity all year long.

"The best thing management can do for any employee is to let them know how much we appreciate their hard work," said Susan Gramatges, chief operating officer of Pierpont Communications, a Houston-based marketing firm. "You get back so much."

Her company gives its workers half a day off on Fridays on a rotating basis. Pierpont has other summertime perks, including bringing in surprise breakfasts, lunches and ice cream sundaes. The company also holds its twice-yearly staff recognition awards in August, with rewards including cash and time off.

It might seem that a company has to have a summertime business slowdown to grant staffers Fridays or other extra time off. But Gramatges said Pierpont is still giving allowing workers to leave early although "it has not slowed down this summer -- we're probably as busy as ever."

"It's something we had done and we wanted to continue to do," Gramatges said. "It increases the motivation for them; they feel management is still very supportive."

Besides improving morale and motivating workers, summer perks like time off will help a company hire and keep good staffers.

"It really is a great retention tool, also a great recruiting tool," said Mark Eber, chief operating officer of Imre Communications, a public relations firm with offices in Baltimore and Washington, D.C.

His company allows its 53 employees to leave at 1 p.m. on eight of 12 Fridays during the summer. The company also has an outing each summer; this year, it's a three-hour cruise out of Annapolis.

"It's going to make them a better employee," he said. "We see it as a small cost of doing business."

Tim Johnson, president of Stearns Johnson Communications Inc. in San Francisco, noted that worker turnover is higher these days than in the past.

"You attract and keep people not just by salary ... but by giving people some flexibility and recognition that they have lives outside of work."

Johnson's company gives staffers three extra paid days off during Memorial Day and Labor Day. He said his company has found that having enjoyed this perk staffers are willing to give something in return the rest of the year. "No one ever says no" when they're asked to work late or on a Saturday, he said.

Other companies let workers have flexible work hours during the summer. At VendorSeek.com, a business-to-business Web site based in Mount Laurel, N.J., president Ken Wisniewski said workers are allowed to telecommute or work from their beach houses. The company's work hours extend from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., and "we do allow people to do a flex time in that time frame."

He likes to give workers a break because the company gets very busy in September and October.

Wisniewski does have other perks for workers, including an early happy hour at a nearby restaurant.

It's the busy season for **NorthStar Moving Corp.** in Los Angeles, making it hard for the workers to take time off, so the perk CEO Ram Katalan provides for his workers is a day of paintball. Employees spend the day at a nearby farm, shooting paint at each other, breaking for lunch and then shooting some more.

"It was a good way to get rid of aggression -- it was just fun," he said.

Renee Miller also sponsors outings -- more traditional ones -- for employees at her advertising agency, The Miller Group, based in Los Angeles. Last week, she took workers to the Getty Center, where they walked together through the exhibits and gardens. She's also taking them to a Mexican restaurant.

"When it's quieter during the summertime, it's the time to recognize our people and show them how much we value them and appreciate them," she said. She noted that starting at the end of August, the company will be going full tilt again, sometime working until 10 p.m.

The summer is also made better by frequent visits from Grady, the dog owned by one Miller Group staffer.

He "puts a whole new spin on the dog days of summer," Miller said.

