

## Motivating the Millennials

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*Centennial Communications devises ways to give its young workers something to strive for*

By Kassia Shishkoff

It is now conventional wisdom that members of the youngest generation in the workforce—the Millennials, or Generation Y—are not motivated by the same things as older employees. Fiftysomethings in upper management are more likely to enjoy a day of golf, while Millennials probably would take no interest whatsoever. So what makes these youngsters tick?

Centennial Communications, a wireless telecom service provider based in Fort Wayne, Ind., has that figured out. The average age of the company's employees is in the mid-twenties, so when members of Centennial's President's Club—the top 10 percent of the company's employees across all of its departments—are rewarded with three-day incentive trips each year, the Millennials expect something a little different. For starters, younger award recipients aren't looking for strict itineraries.

"I research all the information and provide them, ahead of time, all the transportation and activities they could do," says Lorna Kenny, Centennial's corporate events manager. "That way, they can adopt their own schedules."

Kenny gives out a sheet of day- and night-activity ideas, leveraging destination information furnished by convention and visitors bureaus. According to Kenny, Millennials are more likely to want a free night on the town rather than have a large number of scheduled outings—especially ones that start early in the morning.



Centennial puts together brief evening activities each night of the incentive trip, not keeping the employees long, and the days are theirs to enjoy—no work-related or team-building activities. Evening activities go from about 7 to 9:30 p.m.

Besides, "if they partied hard the night before, even the most well-intentioned plan goes by the wayside," says Kenny. "When I pick out a destination for my group, nightlife is important."

For the last four years, Centennial chose Fort Lauderdale, Charleston, San Antonio, and San Diego for its President's Club incentives. The most recent excursion was to Fort Lauderdale, where Kenny chartered a yacht cruise on the Intercoastal Waterway. Top Centennial employees enjoyed food, beverage, and dancing as the charter sailed down the waterway. But the rest of the time, the company's winners were able to partake at their own discretion a trip to the Everglades, shopping on Las Olas Boulevard, and a water taxi trip on the Intercoastal.

### Millennial Merchandise

Not only does Centennial cater to their younger employees in its incentive travel programs, it targets its merchandise awards to them as well. Working with Statesville, NC-based incentive house TharpeRobbins last year, the company developed a line of jewelry for its length-of-service program that is specifically geared toward the younger crowd.

Previously, Centennial had a program where, for every five years of service, an employee receives a letter, a certificate, and a catalog of gifts that included jewelry. But the jewelry awards left something to be desired. "I was looking for a way to improve the program I was running," says Kenny. "I was looking at the jewelry, and a lot of it would not have appealed to our younger Caribbean group."

So Centennial turned to TharpeRobbins. The timing couldn't have been better, as TharpeRobbins was in the process of coming up with its own designs for new, hip jewelry for incentive programs.

"The urban jewelry collection are all designs that we created and put together," says Anthony Luciano, TharpeRobbins' senior vice president of sales and marketing. "We had an exciting catalog, but we were in the process of looking at ways to incent the younger generation."

"If there's a youngster interested in a big hammered ring, or one of the thick silver chains, or big multi-loop earrings, [we make that] accessible to everyone in the company that gets an award," says Kenny. "The idea is you want to offer merchandise that is going to appeal to your audience."

Another challenge that companies with many young employees face is keeping them motivated until they earn their first rewards, which often occurs at the five-year service mark, as with Centennial.

"What we're trying to do with our customers is something for the in-between years," says TharpeRobbins' Luciano. "We call them accolades. It's so that you don't have to wait five years to recognize someone, even if it's just an e-card."

Younger workers are also more apt to change jobs, so it's harder for them to see the incentive to stay with the same company for five years, especially if they're not getting frequent feedback. Luciano says the first couple of years with a company are the most crucial in encouraging a long career with that same employer.

"The first year or two is very important because that's when you're going to get them [to stay]," says Luciano. "If you've got someone for five or 10 years, odds are you're going to have them for 20. But in order to get them to that mark, you've got to incent them a lot in those early years. They want constant and fast feedback, they love electronics, they love things that fit their peer set. Traditional items may not excite them at all."

TharpeRobbins is starting to make its lower-level programs, such as five-year-recognition awards, more geared toward younger recipients and their less-traditional tastes. "Even at our absolute lowest budget level, we put in a 1-gigabyte MP3 player," says Luciano. "We're putting in hotter products, the more exciting types of things in electronics." Luciano says that for the higher award levels, TharpeRobbins is sticking to more traditional items, such as grandfather clocks. "I can't see a 22-year-old person choosing a grandfather clock," he says.

TharpeRobbins stays on top of the latest trends in many ways in its attempt to keep itself modern and to motivate employees of all ages. "We read all the articles, we look at all the trends, we see what's going on with the generation now, and we get feedback from our customers on a constant basis," says Luciano.

When Centennial thought of the idea to create a more trendy jewelry line and tapped TharpeRobbins for help, the merchandise supplier was excited, says Luciano, since it had already begun producing similar products. "When Centennial came up with that," Luciano says, "it really reinforced our hard work."