

Business 'perking' up

NYC firms keep staffs happy and loyal with quirky benefits

BY TRIPP WHETSELL
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Meditation rooms. Cooking lessons. Dogs in the office.

With wages and salaries stagnant thanks to the slow economic recovery, many companies are trying to keep workers happy, satisfied and loyal by offering quirky job perks and other extras.

"We are definitely starting to see a lot more perks that were wished after the recession began slowly being restored," says John Challenger, CEO of employee outplacement consultancy Challenger, Gray & Christmas.

Companies, he adds, "are looking for new ways to retain and appeal to top talent, especially the ones who shoulder the load in every department from the top to the bottom."

Large and small organizations alike are also offering such offbeat extras as yoga classes, massages and free Knicks tickets without gouging the bottom line.

"What companies are trying to do is find inexpensive ways to get people engaged and enjoy their work as much as possible right now...without giving bonuses or salary increases like they used to," says workplace morale consultant Skip Weisman.

Several New York-area companies are seeing the value in giving their workforce unusual incentives to offset shrinking paychecks, longer hours and soaring insurance premiums.

At public relations firm CRT/aka in Chelsea, there's a meditation room where staffers can also take naps and new mothers can nurse during breaks.

DUMBO-based digital media agency HUGE has an open dress code policy, free breakfast and lunch, special discounts at local cafes — and pets are welcome to spend the workday in the office.

At Staten Island Academy, faculty can create their own independent study program and apply for up to \$2,500 in grants each year. There are also complimentary cooking lessons at the French Culinary Institute in SoHo.



DOG DAYS: Bringing pets to work is the norm at tech firm HUGE. Applebee's in Times Square owner Zane Tankle (below) offers movie passes.

GET MORE THAN FREE LUNCH AT THESE FAB 5

Companies are increasingly wooing — and keeping — workers with offbeat perks. Here are some of the more out-there ones:

ZAPPOS.COM

Toss that plague in the trash. The Internet retailer celebrates its Employee of the Month by blasting the song "I Need a Hero" on portable speakers while co-workers parade with noisemakers. Said "hero" gets a cape (of course), the use of a covered parking spot for a month, and a \$150 Zappos gift card.

NETAPP

Workers who want to get fit instead of fat on their lunch break can just head to the massive, \$4 million fitness center in the data storage company's California headquarters. They can shoot hoops, play Ping-Pong, get a massage, or step out to the sand volleyball court.

PRICEWATERHOUSECOOPERS

The consulting firm pairs moms-to-be with experienced mom mentors beginning four months before the due date. Those who don't want to hand their kid off to daycare can take a five-year sabbatical.

GOOGLE

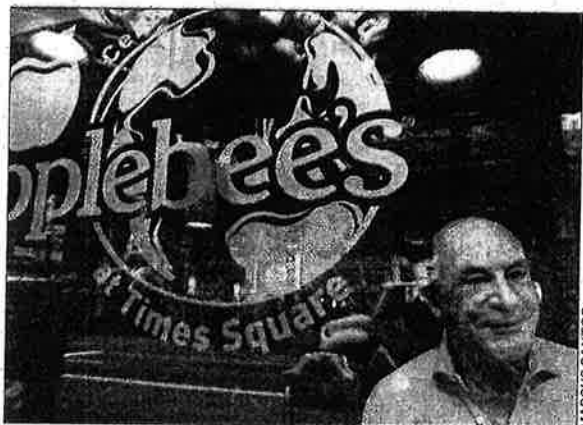
Employees in its New York offices feeling a bit bushy in the brows can sit down for some discounted in-house facial landscaping. Those at the company's California headquarters can chow down on free gourmet food, take free Capoeira classes or hit the outdoor roller hockey rink.

GODADDY.COM

The Internet domain-name seller puts together extracurricular activities for employees like competitive cooking, whitewater rafting and trapeze classes. And if they miss the net, not to worry: The company covers 100% of their healthcare premiums.

Elizabeth Lazarowitz

Source: Fortune



MARCUS SANTOS

If you work at the Spot Experience, a Manhattan dog daycare provider, pooches stay for free.

Then there's Apple-Metro, which runs the local Applebee's restaurant franchise in Westchester. Not only does giving good service get workers into the movies for free, managers get a new car every three years and there's even an annual cruise to Bermuda.

Both employees and employers say these unorthodox extras make for much more than interesting water cooler conversation. They also build morale and encourage loyalty.

"It's been a huge tool in retaining people during tough economic times," said Spot Experience owner Mitch Morrow, a former NFL player.

"It's all about the little things that make the work experience as pleasant as possible," says Sam Weston, a senior communications manager at HUGE, about the company's lax environment.

"I don't have to worry about things like which tie I'm going to wear, or having to deal with bureaucratic rules that interfere with just doing a great job."

Not everyone agrees. Graham Lowe, author of "Creating Healthy Organizations," says job satisfaction should come from the work itself, not the extras.

"They are nice to have and in some industries you can't recruit without them," says Lowe.

"But fundamentally, when it comes to motivating employees and really building commitment to an organization you've got to look at the deeper stuff, like whether or not the job itself gives them a sense of accomplishment."

Another problem is meeting the needs and desires of a diverse workforce without feeling taken advantage of — a lesson learned the hard way by Michelle Madhok, founder and CEO of SheFinds.com, a virtual media content company in Manhattan that offers employees flexible hours.

"It takes a special kind of person to be able to do this," says Madhok.

"It has to be a self-starter and it can't be someone who has to be micromanaged," she adds, recalling a former employee she had to fire for taking the day off without permission and assigning all of her work to an intern.

For other owners, unusual perks is the only way to do business these days. "I don't look at providing these perks as spending money, but rather investing in our own people," says Zane Tankle of Apple-Metro.

"We hold everybody accountable, and you can't do that unless you also look after them."