

POSITIVE COMMUNICATION

Non-profit uses innovative tools to motivate employees & improve bottom line

By ELEANOR BOENS

Two years ago, Virginia Blood Services (VBS), a non-profit blood center, was facing an employee turnover problem and high workers' compensation premiums. Founded 30 years ago to supply blood to central Virginia, the Richmond, Va., organization recognized that the workplace environment needed to change in order to stem premium and worker turnover costs.

Along with making those adjustments, the organization set an ambitious goal for itself: to become an "Employer of Choice." It wanted to create an environment where people would love what they do and do what they love.

To change an organization's culture is not easy, nor does it guarantee instant financial savings. However, VBS recognized that revising the "how," "when" and "why" it communicated to its employees could make a powerful difference in motivating and encouraging them. Indeed, VBS employee surveys indicated that employees wanted to be rewarded and recognized for their work. Because more than half of VBS employees have no access to the Internet, the organization knew that it needed a novel way of reaching its workers.

Communication transformed

To help VBS communicate more effectively to its employees, the organization turned to "Communication Stations," manufactured by The Marlin Company, of North Haven, CT. The glass-enclosed, lit, eye-catching displays contain motivational and safety posters, messages and original content. With them, VBS was able to reinforce its organization's messages of teamwork, quality and safety.

CONVEY YOUR MESSAGE

Communication stations are part of an integrated VBS communication program that includes:

- 👉 quarterly employee meetings
- 👉 a biweekly print employee newsletter
- 👉 a quarterly community newsletter
- 👉 an annual report, and
- 👉 messages from the president to employees on special topics as needed.

The messages used on the communication stations are motivational, positive and reinforce the company's values. The stations enable a small company or organization that simply doesn't have the resources to generate quality communications in-house.

Before VBS purchased the communication stations for its eight work sites two years ago, the organization relied on old-fashioned bulletin boards that contained mandatory state and federal postings and company memos. They weren't attractive or eye-catching, and there was nothing on them to make people want to read them.

In contrast, the communication stations are interesting, colorful, educational and can incorporate humor. People enjoy reading them, and they are very well-received by VBS employees.

VBS rotates the content on the stations, which are located in each of the site's break rooms. The organization receives a month's worth of content at a time, making it easy to rotate the content weekly and keep it fresh. Since mostly everyone visits the break room from time to time, it's an efficient way to get messages to all employees.

Integrated program

The communication stations are part of an integrated VBS communication program that includes quarterly employee meetings, a biweekly print employee newsletter, a quarterly community newsletter, an annual report, and messages from the president to employees on special topics as needed. While the VBS-created materials are very company-specific, Marlin provides messages that are more motivational and value-oriented. Together, the materials help VBS inform, motivate and educate employees in a way the non-profit organization could never do on its own.

The messages also consistently put the importance of safety in front of people. Many of the messages are about safety, quality and teamwork — everything an organization wants employees to do right every day. Reinforcing workplace safety was especially important to VBS; its workers' compensation policy had



Three-panel "communication station" helps VBS creatively convey safety messages.

been put in the assigned risk pool as a result of its high rate of accidents.

As part of its concentrated effort to improve workplace attitudes and behavior and become an "Employer of Choice," VBS also instituted safety training and provided employees with a fixed work schedule.

Significant savings

The non-profit organization's strategy to improve workplace attitudes and behavior has paid off. Last year, VBS's workers' compensation policy was removed from the assigned risk pool, saving the organization \$40,000. Its employee turnover significantly decreased, going from 34 percent in 2002 to 23 percent in 2004, a savings of \$364,000.

VBS also was recognized in May 2005 as an all-star "Employer of Choice" by the Richmond Human Resources Management Association and the Greater Richmond Chamber of Commerce — one of only two organizations recognized for outstanding policies and practices that contribute to being a "great employer."

VBS's communications programs are an important component in its "Employer of Choice" recognition, and the programs have had a tangible effect on employees. It shows not only in statistics but in the day-to-day attitudes of employees. Morale is high and the proof is in their improved performance and attitudes. The program has paid for itself many times over.

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