Employees share the perks that work and the rewards they love

After an exceptionally long and tough wedding season, designer Suzanne M. Smith decided to go medieval with her staff to keep them motivated. She knew it might get ugly and could even elicit a few screams and shrieks, but the owner of Suzanne M. Smith Designs didn’t let that stop her from hosting “The Night Macabre,” an employee appreciation party in October 2009 that included a punk band, skull centerpieces, candy eyeball-accented cupcakes and more black fingernail polish than an Avril Lavigne concert.

Her six employees and a dozen or so seasonal workers donned goth or vintage attire, brought along friends and family members (with at least one sporting a gas mask) and partied late into the night — the perfect way to let off steam at one of the few soirees this event-heavy crew in Huntington Beach, Calif., didn’t have to set up. There were no boring speeches, no employee-of-the-year certificates and no outlining of future goals.

PALE IN COMPARISON When Suzanne Smith, right, threw an employee appreciation party last October, the guest list included a rock band and an illusionist, but the guests of honor were her staff.
If your idea of an employee appreciation party leans more toward bagels than fake blood, that’s fine — as long as that’s your staff’s idea of a nice thank you. What made the event so successful is that it spoke (or shrieked) to the attitude and interests of the Smith crew. It wasn’t so much a work event as just an extension of how they’d be partying (minus a few fake headstones) on any other weekend night. And Smith knew this because she listens when they recount their escapades, she asks questions about their favorite bands and gets just as excited about news that Ozzy Osbourne is going to be at a local bookstore (Smith went and asked the Prince of Darkness his favorite flower! His answer: Gardenias). Even the Night Macabre goody-bags were customized with beach gear for some, a favorite book for another and a team jersey for another.

“Taking the time to listen to my crew talk about their hobbies and life outside of work can make a big difference, especially now,” said Smith. “We’re all in this together and it’s important to show them that the commitment goes both ways.”

They seem to be getting the message.

“Gratuities are great, but the extras like being treated to a crew dinner after a hard day or a party after a busy season — and the laughs we share — make me feel appreciated and a valued part of the team,” said Joel Valadez, a seasonal decor crew member and surfer whose goody bag included surf wax.

Tailoring benefits to the staff’s taste was a familiar thread among the florists we talked to about how they’re thanking their employees, especially as the recession has put more traditional raises and bonuses out of the equation. It’s not as if they haven’t been paying attention to what their employees wanted before. It’s just that as the resources get scarcer, the hours get longer and the sacrifices get greater, the perks tend to get more personal.

Florists and their employees shared what perks work for their shop, emphasizing that not all benefits are tangible. Non-stop laughter, a sense of respect despite being the youngest on the payroll, the security of knowing that the boss respects your life beyond the shop — these were all cited by staff members. So before you race out and buy that Starbucks gift card, read on for some unconventional ways to show you care.
THE PLACE Concord Flower Shop, Concord, Mass.

PEOPLE POWER Three employees with a combined 46 years at the 26-year-old shop, plus owner Helen Halloran, her husband, Dave, and mom, Daisy Dearborn

When asked how she made it through this recession, Helen Halloran doesn’t hesitate to give credit to her dedicated employees, who’ve implemented new ideas this past year, including a new website, new point of sale system and the decision to be a wire-free shop.

“We’ve made a lot of tough choices and even though the learning curve has been steeper than any of us imagined, my staff has remained positive, flexible and supportive,” said the owner of the shop in Concord, Mass. “This economy has been a challenge, but I look forward to work every day even after 26 years in business, because not only do I enjoy the flower business, but I have great employees who help me succeed.”

The team took its lead from Halloran, who is always in the trenches with the staff. “Helen has a ‘go forth and conquer’ mentality that is contagious,” said Kathleen Wahl, who’s seen that attitude in action for 25 years. “It was never more evident than when she switched everything over to a new computer system — and tackled all the challenges this past year.”

One of the best things about working here is that when you walk through the door, you walk into a comfortable place. You can express a new idea or technique and, even if you are initially met with skepticism, you are allowed to test your wings.

KATHLEEN WAHL, DESIGNER, CONCORD FLOWER SHOP, 25 YEARS

When I hear people complaining about their jobs, I’m grateful I’m not wrestling with scheduling problems.

Leadership is best when you behave and respond in a way you would want your employees to emulate. No lecture or meeting speaks as eloquently as your actions.

The most fun I have ever had at the shop is when I have laughed so hard my side ached (which has happened A LOT). We work very hard, and at certain times of the year, we put in exhausting hours, but when you can lighten the mood or laugh at some little thing, it makes the time so much more enjoyable.

JULIE GOODWIN, DESIGNER, FOUR YEARS

Even when it’s been tough I’ve stayed here, because this is the one job I’ve ever had that I’ve had no reason to quit! Helen makes it really easy to be flexible about my schedule. I’ve held down three jobs, but the Concord Flower Shop has always been my No. 1 priority. Feeling like an essential part of a team is definitely an incentive to stay with a job.

The best lesson I’ve learned about teamwork is if you can’t work as a team, get out of the floral industry right now! Some days it’s so busy that one of us will start a project, another one will see that the other person has gotten side tracked with a customer, so they’ll work on it... and maybe a third person will complete the project!

The best lesson I’ve learned about leadership here is that it doesn’t mean bossing people around. It’s being someone who can instruct, and that people can come to for help or input, but still feel like that person treats them as a peer.

You know your work is fun when we had a new person delivering for us, and two days in a row he came in the back door and said something to the effect of “I could hear you laughing all the way across the parking lot! What on earth is so funny?” We laughed hysterically at this and wondered why everyone doesn’t have that much fun at work.

MIKE O’LEARY, DELIVERY DRIVER, THREE YEARS

The best perk is the happiness I derive from delivering flowers to new parents, the elderly, and of course romantic couples! I enjoy experiencing their happiness when they see me coming up the driveway, or opening the door to a beautiful bouquet of flowers.
The Perks that Work
No lectures. Few meetings. Lots of flexibility. Endless laughs. The occasional practical joke and the comfort of working with friends who have your back and a boss who respects your ideas. After a quarter of a century at Concord Flower Shop, Kathleen Wahl can easily tick off why she stays there.

“I am grateful to work with people whom I call my friends in a place that feels like home and inspires me” she said.

Designer Julie Goodwin is equally enthusiastic after just four years at the shop, having had the opportunity to switch responsibilities with her boss in January when the boss wanted some lessons about technology (Goodwin had done all the Web updating and other tech chores). The “mentor swap” boosted the experience and confidence of Concord’s newest designer.

While they’re not part of a formal list of benefits, the respect for employees’ ideas, an emphasis on having fun and a casual atmosphere are what Halloran considers her most genuine and powerful perks. “Helen has always been very open and flexible toward our schedules,” Wahl said. “She knows, and trusts, that even if we need time off here and there, we will be planted behind our tables for any holiday or large event that calls for our undivided attention.”

Halloran’s casual approach also includes paying for lunch during busy holiday prep days, a generous employee discount (50 percent), a complimentary holiday arrangement (when customers’ orders are filled, of course) and end of the week freebies of past-date perishables.

“I also make sure to give credit where credit is due and pass on customer compliments to my employees,” Halloran said. “I am extremely flexible in scheduling and everyone is great at working the long hours when I need them, so if they want time off at other times, it’s not a problem.”

The best lesson I’ve learned about leadership is you can always depend on Jo and Shelby to help you through life’s trials and the day-to-day dramas.

The most fun I have ever had at work was when we went to a lake party at Jo’s house and we all went tubing — not a big deal for most people but I can’t swim a stroke. Still, I would do it again in a heartbeat. Of course, we do crazy stuff at holidays to keep up morale and just make each day a hoot. Shirley’s Flowers knows how to have fun!

The best lesson I’ve learned about teamwork is when one teammate is unable to work we all pull together to make it all go smoothly.

The magazine of the Society of American Florists (SAF)
BE PERKY

Before running Always Bloomin Floral Salon in Plainville, Conn., Steven Smith worked in the beauty industry, where he loved watching the effect a little pampering could have. So when he saw the toll holidays and big events could take on his staff, he knew what they needed: a massage. Now, 20-minute massages in the shop are standard practice, as are catered “real meals” at least once during busy weeks.

“Having a complimentary massage after Valentine’s Day was one of the best ways I’ve ever been thanked after an exhausting holiday,” said creative designer Teresa Sakowicz. “It really showed he understood just what kind of havoc this occupation can play on a body. It was awesome!”

Here’s a roundup of the staff perks mentioned in the article, for quick reference:

- Post-holiday massages
- Annual canoe trip
- Pedicures
- Catered meals during holiday weeks
- Flexible schedules
- 50 percent employee discount
- Wear Your PJs To Work Day, Crazy Hair Day
- The Cat’s Away Day (when the boss is out), with free lunches
- Free holiday arrangement
- Birthday party with cake
- Birthday gift cards (recipient’s choice)
- 10-year anniversary dinner
- Free rose for every year in service, plus vase on anniversary
- Staff appreciation party with rock band
- Annual Christmas party potluck at boss’s house, with white elephant exchange
- Raffle for big prize (XBox!) at holiday party
- Boss-delivered McDonald’s Shamrock shakes and Culver’s Raspberry Lemonade Coolers
- Premium, personal floral tools
- Event designer commissions (2 percent of cost at time of event, 4 percent each quarter if booking goals are met)
- Daily design commissions tied to productivity
- Interest-free loans
- Employee happy hours every Friday (in the shop)
- Paid vacation time
- 75 percent contribution to medical benefits
- 5 percent annual raise
- Holiday bonus
- “American Idol” parties
- Super Bowl parties
- Employee shout outs and compliments on Facebook and in blogs
- Good coffee in the a.m.
- Good beer after 5 p.m.
- Good chocolate in between.

SERIOUS FUN When it comes to birthdays at Shirley’s Flowers, the dress code is as loud and zany as the celebrations are personal and powerful reasons for loving their jobs. Above: Maria Tapia sees her birthday in a new light and Evan Carnes models his party hat.
The Perks that Work

Shirley’s numerous rewards basically fall into two categories: fun and financial.

When it comes to celebrating birthdays, anniversaries, engagements and holidays (real and invented), the staff employs plenty of props to give one another “props.” They pull out over-sized party hats, sunglasses and the occasional pair of pajamas (for Crazy Hair and PJ Day, what else?)

There are no combined birthday celebrations. Each employee’s arrival on the planet is feted with a present and a birthday cake. Employees pitch in (about $3 each), and the birthday boy or girl can choose a gift card of his or her liking or the money.

Anniversaries are an equally big deal. Buttram lets the celebrant choose a rose for each year employed and any container in stock. When an employee celebrates 10 years (as five have), they choose the restaurant and the entire staff heads out to dinner, on Buttram. For some of the more senior staff members, Buttram has rewarded their loyalty, when the budget allows, with a weekend trip.

When the recession became reality in Charleston, Manny Gonzales didn’t mince words. He told the staff: 1) Getting Tiger Lily through the recession will not be easy, and 2) We will get through it.

He assigned logistical department heads (sales, delivery, design, events, weddings, etc.) to work on their respective goals constantly. They held weekly meetings and discussed the status of each department. And he made sure employees realized how having a good job would insulate them from the downturn’s harshest effects.

“I stressed with the staff that with inflation low, the recession is mostly affecting the unemployed. If they lose their job, finding a new one will be tough,” Gonzales said. With the stakes higher than ever, he let three low performers

Buttram hosts the annual Christmas party potluck at her lakeside home (another budgetary decision to save the cost of eating at a restaurant). Monetary bonuses are given to all and everyone is entered into a raffle. This past year, Buttram and Shy woke up at the crack of dawn to stand in line on Black Friday for the prize: an XBox. To keep the giggle track going, the staff keeps up the tradition of a white elephant exchange.

For busy floral holidays, like Valentine’s Day, Buttram brings in a massage therapist to do seated massages and negotiates a trade with a gourmet lunch place for every day of the holiday week. For Mother’s Day, Buttram tapped into the joy of surviving a long winter and gave her entire staff bottles of Clinique “Happy” perfume (for men and women).

But there’s one outing that always gets and keeps employees talking: the annual canoe trip. Buttram books a bus and they all pile on for a day of rowing and ribbing each other. (“Now that’s bonding — seeing me in a bathing suit,” Buttram said.)

The boss’s lakeside home is also the scene of an annual cookout with swimming, boating and, this year, an “American Idol” party. She also recently hosted a wedding of one employee there!

In the shop, the staff keeps the party mentality alive with their own brand of holidays: Sock Day, Crazy Hair and PJ Day and Hat Day. Judging by the blog, participation is high among the creative staff, who show their design flair doesn’t end with flowers.

On the more serious side, Buttram said she will do a short-term, interest-free loan to an employee who needs some cash.

While it’s not a conventional perk, doling out of compliments in public is rampant at the shop. Whenever an employee wins an award, gets designs featured in a magazine or is mentioned by a customer, Shy usually gushes about it on Shirley’s blog (http://shirleysflowersinc.blogspot.com) and Facebook page.

THE PLACE Tiger Lily, Charleston, S.C.

PEOPLE POWER 16 employees with a combined 45 years at the 14-year-old shop, plus owners Manny and Clare Gonzales

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The best lesson I’ve learned about leadership is everyone is different. Each person has her own unique way of being motivated, and the trick is to find that way and apply to that person.

My advice for someone starting at Tiger Lily? It’s not all roses and lollipops! Playing with flowers isn’t easy. It’s hard, physical work but at the end of the day, you will touch another person’s life. Every single flower counts!
should have created at least $1,000 in designs. If she earned $85 in wages but worked very quickly and created $1,000 in designs, that designer earns a bonus of $15 for that day. “It keeps the pace very high,” Gonzales said. “It’s possible for the folks to earn more money and work the same hours, or make the same amount of money but work less hours, or perhaps even make more money and work less hours.”

The program is a “work in progress” he said. The staff understands the importance of urgency, but hasn’t figured out a way to work more efficiently every day. They hit their bonus about 25 percent of the time, Gonzales said, noting that it’s improving each quarter.

Overall, the incentive mentality is paying off. Sales are up 11 percent, and more importantly, the employees understand directly how that boost impacts their own bottom lines.

“I want our folks to work hard and smart, be very productive, be rewarded for that and build a team that stays with us forever,” Gonzales said. “Is that too much to ask?”

The Perks that Work
Commissions and creative freedom are the retention drivers at Tiger Lily, but Gonzales does stress the importance of what he calls the “Cornerstone Tiger Lily Bonus Package:” Good coffee in the a.m. Good beer after 5 p.m. Good chocolate in between. Designers also note the frequency of special thank-yous, like free tickets to galas, movies and dinner invites, especially during peak times when everyone is working full throttle.

Gonzales recently changed the event designers’ commission plan to concentrate more on getting new clients. In the past, they earned 5 percent of every event over $500. Although they worked hard and earned on average a combined $50,000 in commissions, the plan rewarded them for designing the event, but did not stress booking. “We wanted to incentivize them to go out there and get the business, not just wait for it,” Gonzales said.

The new program gives designers 2 percent of the event’s cost at the time it happens and then another 4 percent at the end of the quarter if they reach the overall booking goals. In the first quarter of this year, all designers hit their numbers and Gonzales sees evidence of the success off the balance sheet too. “They have showed a lot more energy in consultations, and share enthusiasm for big weddings and events,” he said.

Daily designers weren’t left out of the bonus pool, where the emphasis is on increasing productivity. “Before, no matter how many orders we had, 10 or 110, we finished in exactly eight hours,” he said. “The work expanded to fill the day.”

Now, wages are tied to productivity, and the goal is 10 percent of sales: If a designer earns $100 in wages (including taxes and medical benefits), she should have created at least $1,000 in designs. If she earned $85 in wages but worked very quickly and created $1,000 in designs, that designer earns a bonus of $15 for that day. “It keeps the pace very high,” Gonzales said. “It’s possible for the folks to earn more money and work the same hours, or make the same amount of money but work less hours, or perhaps even make more money and work less hours.”

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Marty Loppnow knows the tough side of having a tight-knit staff. “The worst days as a small business owner are when you have to let someone go,” said Loppnow, vice president at Waukesha Floral & Greenhouse, Inc., who was forced to do that because of the recession. The longtime employee said she understood the decision was a necessity for the overall health of the shop, but that didn’t make it easier to fire a friend. He then had to tell the rest of the staff that everyone — from the floor sweeper to the president — was getting the same percentage cut in pay. What he described as “the hardest meeting I’d ever led” was followed by one of strongest showings of support he’s seen as a manager. “They had to pick up the increased work-load, and they did it with no grumbles,” he said. “That’s when you know that the people you have picked over the years were the right ones.”

And that’s when you get creative in making sure they realize you know how lucky you are. He’d like to do more, but with cash flow still tight, Loppnow is pouring on the appreciation in little ways.

The Perks that Work

For designers at Waukesha Floral, McDonald’s Shamrock Shake season is equally-anticipated as spring is to the winter weary, Loppnow said about his frequent deliveries that keep folks cool under pressure. For summer, he switches over to Culver’s raspberry Lemonade Coolers.

When the company president takes a vacation, the shop has a “When the Cat’s Away Day” and brings in lunch from a restaurant of the staff’s choosing. Not all rewards are treats you can eat, though. Recently, the designers recently received a new set of high-quality tools, including a knife, wire cutter and ribbon shears for each. (It’s the shop’s policy that designers bring their own tools to work, because they will respect them if they own them.)

Waukesha employees that go “the extra mile” also get cold hard cash to accompany those frozen goodies. For instance, after a particularly exhausting winter holiday season this past year, the managers gave the head designer some extra cash to take on her planned trip to Las Vegas. And while what happens in Vegas does tend to stay there, that designer did bring back an appreciation for her coworkers that you can bet will last longer than any of her slot winnings.

I know I’m appreciated here because when I return from my time away in Florida, I am greeted with hugs, “we missed you!”, dinners out and I’m told I can’t ever leave again!

JOANN ALIOTO, DESIGNER, 5 YEARS, WORKS SEASONALLY MAY TO DECEMBER

The most fun I have had at work is when a customer calls and thanks me for a beautiful design or compliments me on something I’ve done for them. It’s always very satisfying when I make the customer happy; that’s what my job is all about. And also, I have fun with my coworkers; they make me laugh!

Amanda Long is the perky managing editor of Floral Management. E-mail: along@safnow.org