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Waxing Nostalgic

"Nostalgia is a file that removes the rough edges from the good old days."

—Doug Larson

Ah, September... Crickets and locusts still making nighttime music. Treetops just starting to give a hint of color to come. Goldenrod filling up the prairie where I walk. Weather waffling between summer and not-so-summer, depending on whether you're standing in the sun or the shade. Christmas decorations on the retail shelves. OK, that last one might be a bit premature, but September is still my favorite month. The slow-motion switch from summer to autumn.

Over time, I've noticed that there are a couple of things—outside of the weather—that almost always come with September. First of all, it's a good time for making new resolutions. Even better, I'd argue, than New Year's. After all, our brains are well-trained through a couple decades of youthful new beginnings that this is the time to start a new routine. And I won't deny I've got a whole slew of new routines that began as soon as my 10-year-old's foot hit the step of the school bus.

But for today's purposes, I'd like to talk about the other thing—the nostalgia thing.

Maybe it's because it's the month of my birthday. Maybe it's because this is the month I moved into my first apartment, all those (mumble-mumble) years ago. But for whatever reason, September always gets me thinking about times past. Missing old friends. Indulging what-ifs and coulda-beens. Nostalgia can be a fun place to hang out, though you can't live there. It's delightful to get a letter from an old friend. To dig out old photographs of long-ago holidays and road trips. To read what was once a favorite book.

Perhaps what makes nostalgia so sweet is that our memory weeds out all the everyday stuff we got bogged in, and what remains for our

enjoyment (or embarrassment, depending) is what was overwhelmingly powerful or what was overwhelmingly authentic in our past experience.

Oftentimes, it feels like we get bogged down in the day-to-day, and those authentic experiences are missing, but I would argue that we probably have that authenticity—mostly—in about the same amounts all the time. When you're in the woods, though, you see all the trees. It's not until you're on the outside that you remember the individual oaks and cottonwoods that caught your eye.

I've noticed the word "authenticity" coming up a bit more often in business writing lately, with the suggestion that it's something we should be aiming for—especially when we recognize, when we motivate, when we reward. And, the fact is, if you want to deliver an authentic experience, you have to make an impact. This is, perhaps, why studies have shown that the experience of getting a reward, the experience of earning recognition, is valued so highly by program participants. It could also explain why even the peers of the person being rewarded can be so affected by that experience.

The powerful thing about rewards and recognition is that, when done right, in an authentic and meaningful way, they can create tomorrow's nostalgia.

So, how do you make it meaningful?

Cheers!



Emily Tipping
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On the Go

A look at who's moving up, who's expanding programs, and who's been recognized for outstanding achievements in the premium/incentive industry.

Premium Incentive Products' Paul Hennessy Recognized

Paul Hennessy, publisher and founder of *Premium Incentive Products* magazine, received the 2016 IMA President's Award. The IMA President's Award recognizes individuals who have actively furthered the Incentive Marketing Association's mission to create a greater awareness of incentives; help incentive suppliers prosper in a changing business environment through education, training, research and marketing; and through example, promote high standards of professionalism in the incentive field.

Top Brands Announces Rebranding Approach

Top Brands Inc., a national marketing company and supplier of name-brand merchandise and awards for corporate programs since 1961, announced its ongoing rebranding approach to align with the ever-evolving incentive industry.

Heidi Chatfield Receives Karen Renk Award

The Incentive Marketing Association (IMA) honored Heidi Chatfield, CPIM, vice president and new business development, All Star Incentive Marketing, with the Karen Renk Fellowship Award. The prestigious award was established in 2014 to honor Renk, who served as the IMA Executive Director for its first 14 years.

Dittman Is Now Next Level Performance

For 40 years, Dittman Incentive Marketing has been helping organizations to motivate their employees and business partners to achieve more. Whether running a world-class travel incentive program or providing engaging employee recognition software, the focus has always been on moving clients to the next level. To reflect this purpose, the company will now be known as Next Level Performance, a Dittman Company.

IMA Announces New Board for 2016-2017

The Incentive Marketing Association announced its new board for 2016-2017. Sean Roark, CPIM, vice president incentive programs, PromoPros/IncentPros Inc. will serve as president. The IMA also elected John Hornbogen, RPG Card Services, as executive vice president; Susan Gray, Hallmark Business Connections, vice president; Ted Moravec, Elite Creations, treasurer; and Anne Jetter, GiftCertificates.com, secretary.

Three newly elected directors, Fintan Connolly, IP, Globoforce Ltd.; Bill Martocci, Carlisle Sales & Marketing Inc.; and Rick Rubin, National Gift Card Corporation; and one appointed representative, Jim Atten, Shell Gift Card; join the IMA board of directors. Returning IMA board members include: Heather Abbott, Powerhouse Brands Consulting; Brian Dunne, IP, SVM Europe Ltd.; Lindsay Gale, Tango Card Inc.; Chris Harrison, KlerWest LLC; Don Killingback, Wyndham Exchange & Rentals/Endless Vacation Rentals; Christiano Miano, IP, Grupo Digi; Scott Plybon, The Plybon Company; Rebekka Rea, Innovative Prepaid Solutions/Earls Rib Palace; Billie Reise, Incentive Concepts LLC; Jody Running, CPIM, Top Brands Inc.; Len Sadek, Landry's Inc.; and Sean Wilkinson, Corporate Rewards.

Hinda Incentives Expands International Portfolio

Hinda Incentives has announced the expansion of its international rewards portfolio. With the continued globalization of corporations—where more than 30 percent of employees in multicultural companies work outside the United States—Hinda saw the need to offer clients an international rewards program, now available in more than 120 countries.

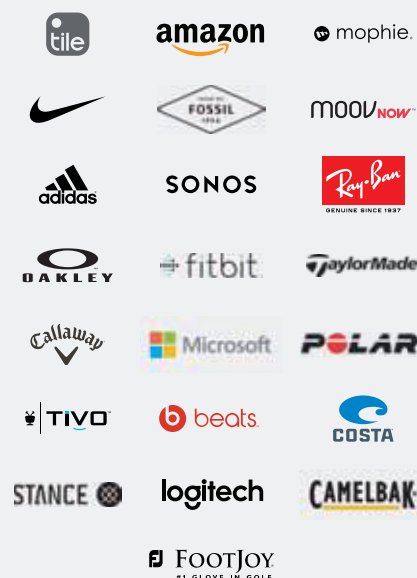
Aimia Awarded 2016 Cvent Plannie

Aimia Inc., a global data-driven marketing and loyalty analytics company, has been named a 2016 Cvent Plannie Award winner in "The Listener: Best Event Feedback Strategy" category.

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National Gift Card Reveals B2B Retail Gift Card Redemption Data

Through its 2,000 global corporate clients in the loyalty, rewards and incentive industry, National Gift Card Corp. (NGC), a leading B2B gift card solution partner with more than 450 gift card options for use in the United States, Canada and Europe, released its mid-year gift card redemption statistics for U.S.-based loyalty programs.

Some of the statistics include:

- Nearly three-quarters of all gift card redemptions in loyalty and rewards programs come from just three categories: Big Box retailers (29 percent); Open Loop rewards cards such as Visa and American Express (23 percent); and Entertainment gift cards such as iTunes, GameStop, Regal Theaters, etc. (10 percent).
- Gift cards in Home Improvement (6 percent), Casual Dining (6 percent) and Department Stores (5 percent) occupy the redemption middle ground. Casual Dining, as a category, accounted for 40 individual brands.
- Closed Loop gift cards (cards that may be spent at a specific retailer) outpace Open Loop gift cards 4 to 1.

In addition to the standard category of statistics on gift card redemptions in B2B programs, NGC reported that the majority of U.S. participants who earn a reward from their employer or loyalty program choose to receive a physical gift versus a digital one (87 percent select physical cards over digital when given the choice).



“There is still an incredibly strong demand for people who want to hold their tangible reward and/or don’t quite trust digital gift card redemption yet,” said NGC President Eric Thiels. However, he added, “We anticipate the shift of those statistics toward a 50/50 mix in the next 10 years as more gen Z and gen Y (millennials) are earning rewards from their B2B marketplace programs. But currently it’s the gen X and baby boomers at the height of their careers or heading into retirement who are earning and redeeming the most loyalty points, and this group will undoubtedly want to see physical gift card redemption as an option in their program.”

While physical gift cards will continue to serve as the foundation of traditional loyalty programs with a mixed age demographic, Thiels shared that digital gift card redemptions are increasing by double digits in programs using NGC’s gift card API, where there is a need for the end recipient to receive their gift card in real time after they redeem their points, miles or cash-back rewards.

“There is a growing subset of people who want their gift card immediately when they redeem points,” Thiels said, “and that’s where loyalty program managers will want to ensure they have tapped into a gift card API provider like NGC.”

These statistics were generated from monitoring the gift card purchases of thousands of corporate clients in the loyalty, rewards and incentive markets, generating several hundred million dollars in B2B gift card volume in the United States.

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Food Gifting On the Rise

They say it's better to give than to receive. These days the givers are increasingly choosing to send the gift of food, according to a market research publisher in the new report *Food Gifting in the U.S., 5th Edition*. This includes a projected 4 percent increase in corporate sales in 2016, according to Packaged Facts.

Since 2010, consumers have continued to expand their usage of food gifting across occasions and food gift types. Food gifts are given not just on major holidays such as Christmas, or on special occasions such as birthdays, but are also being sent "just because" or in celebration of typically less beloved holidays. Moreover, Packaged Facts' data suggest that average spending per food gift and the number of intended food gifting recipients is on the rise.

Packaged Facts forecasts U.S. consumer and corporate food gifting sales will approach \$18 billion in 2016, up 3.5 percent from 2015. Of this amount, the majority is attributed to consumer sales.

However, corporate sales are expected to rise 4 percent. Corporate food gifting

presently enjoys noticeable momentum as it is buoyed by positive employment trends and corporate gift-giving and gift spending trends. Corporate food sales are also benefiting from companies creating gift baskets designed specifically to appeal to those in the business world.

By a wide margin, boxed chocolates/candies remain the most prevalently chosen food gift that people purchase for others, with some 28 percent of food gifters purchasing boxed chocolates/candies for someone else in the past 12 months. Other relatively widely purchased food gifts include sweet baked gift foods, coffee/tea/hot chocolate gifts, and nut/salty snack gift foods.

Packaged Facts found that by occasion, among adults 18 and older, the winter holidays are a food gifting mainstay. Almost half of those who have purchased food gifts for others have done so for the winter holidays, while 32 percent of those who have purchased food gifts for themselves have done so for these holidays. Birthdays are also a popular food gifting occasion. For more information, visit www.packagedfacts.com.

2016 IMA Circle of Excellence Award Winners Announced

Five IMA member companies and their incentive partners took home awards for outstanding successful customer and employee incentive programs designed to help drive business. The 2016 IMA Circle of Excellence Awards were presented at the Incentive Marketing Association (IMA) Annual Summit in Houston, Texas, in July 2016.

"This year's award winners truly show how business improves with well-designed incentive programs that support business objectives," said Joe Zanone, 2016 Circle of Excellence Awards chair. "If you look at the results of these programs, it's not just the right incentive, it's the entire program, designed and executed by IMA members with the expertise to help businesses make it happen," Zanone explained.

Launched in 2000, the IMA Circle of Excellence Awards identify and recognize outstanding examples of successful customer and employee incentive programs designed to help improve business. Both the company and the incentive marketing partner are recognized. The 2016 winners are:

Power2Motivate with Brother International Australia – Consumer Offer/Branding Program/Customer Loyalty

Power2Motivate was asked to provide an "out of this world" idea for Brother International Australia's key back-to-school high-sales period. The Brother \$100K Prize Giveaway! Program exceeded all goals for sales, participation, engagement and usage. The program, which increased sales by 28 percent over the previous year, was targeted to printer and hardware, resellers across Australia. Travel incentives were selected for the top prizes because of the demographics and location of the business owners, who may not vacation often. For each minimum monthly purchase of Brother hardware resellers earned points toward a travel grand prize. Additional points and instant wins were earned through a "Spin to Win" game of chance where resellers earned instant points toward a wide range of rewards.

Fusion Marketing with Sprint – Dealer Distributor Incentive

Participation in the "Sprint Rewards Me" dealer channel incentive program had dwindled to 30 percent since the program's inception in 2008. In 2014, Fusion Marketing was asked to refresh and rebrand the program, which was relaunched in early 2015. Designed to appeal to Sprint's primarily millennial dealer demographic, the program was designed to make them feel personally rewarded and featured significant promotions throughout the year. Sales reps were able to redeem points for cash, via a re-loadable Visa debit card, and merchandise via third-party integration with a rewards partner. Participation in the revitalized program grew to 78 percent with active, enrolled reps outselling non-enrolled reps three to one. Replacing the outdated technology with new, more sophisticated technology created many efficiencies, which enhanced the overall success of the program.

Corporate Rewards with Wincanton – Recognition Program

After introducing a new company vision, mission and core values, Wincanton brought in Corporate Rewards to develop and launch a program to engage employees in the new company culture. Historically recognition had been inconsistent and employee surveys highlighted need for change. Corporate Rewards

engaged company leaders in defining program goals and involved them in training and communication throughout the development and launch of the online employee engagement system called "Your Recognition." The new program allowed every employee to send an e-card to an employee who demonstrated one of the company values. A sporting theme incorporated images of sports medals to convey achievements and performance. Senders awarded points to the recipient by selecting bronze, silver or gold level reward. The highly successful program exceeded all goals including over 25 percent more thank you's sent.

Solterbeck/Sensis –Sales Incentive Program and Employee Incentive Program (2 awards)

Sensis brought in Solterbeck to help boost employee engagement and drive revenue growth across multiple product lines after the company was acquired by a private equity firm. The existing incentive program, which offered 40 rewards, was often maxed out well before year end, thereby not offering the same chance of reward to all sales staff. Sensis was looking for a fresh approach that focused on performance throughout the year. Solterbeck created "Performance First." Eligible sales team members participate in six different "Sales Sprints," receive recognition and have their sales commissions calculated for each Sprint. The program offered large travel, medium and small rewards. The sophisticated program relied on three, fully-integrated software solutions that allowed Sensis to provide a single source for all sales and reward activity information in one place. Sensis significantly increased revenue and program participation while greatly reducing costs, and they received many supportive and appreciate comments from sales team members.

Ciloyalty with Bupa Australia – Recognition Program

Bupa, a large health insurance and care-home provider with more than 80,000 employees asked Ciloyalty to help restructure and rebrand its aging "Bupa Sales Academy." Staff surveys and focus groups identified that personal recognition was more valued than prizes. The new "Bupa Boost" program focused on creating a culture of recognition and providing a morale boost to Bupa's employees who work hard to look after the health of others. While the Academy focused on revenue goals, the Boost program put customers first by encouraging better outcomes for clients through smart business practices and strong customer service. Depending on their roles, employees are rewarded monthly, quarterly and yearly. The Boost Reward Team also runs discretionary programs that complement the monthly and quarterly incentives, creating competitions that fill the gaps identified in the business' capability or performance. Participation in Bupa Boost far surpassed the Academy with more than double the number of participants.

Refresh for IMA Circle of Excellence Awards

Like many of this year's winners, the 2016 IMA Circle of Excellence Awards Ceremony, sponsored by Peludica Glass, showcased a refreshed program with a new award and a new format. The elegant award, designed and contributed by Crystal D, reflects the growing importance of the expertise, reward and recognition experience IMA members provide to businesses looking to improve performance.



Stephanie Sheehan is Senior Manager of Vendor Relations for Rymax Marketing Services Inc., a full-service loyalty marketing provider in the incentive industry solely focused on creating programs and events to drive ROI through brand name rewards. For 20 years organizations partnered with Rymax have seen an increase in employee performance and retention, customer loyalty and overall revenue. For more information, visit www.rymaxinc.com.

Matching Reward Selections to Program Demographics

The importance of rewards and recognition is undeniable. It's a driving force for behaviors including loyalty, motivation and commitment, and customers, employees and consumers alike are constantly evaluating the return in every choice they make.

In a society that places such a high value on individuality and celebrating differences, it is important to offer your audience an assortment of branded merchandise across all categories. By giving them the power of choice, you encourage a gift selection that fits their personal aspirations, which maximizes the reward experience. Choosing this assortment is critical to the success of the program. Statistical data collected from your audience such as earnings, age, geography and gender should be married with brand demographic data to create a measure of qualifications for your merchandise assortment.

Merchandise should be aspirational but also attainable—the goal shouldn't be so far out of reach that it discourages members from participating.

First, determine if there is a minimum value that makes sense for your program's ROI. Using a consumer loyalty program as an example, points are received for every purchase your consumer makes, but you may not want your customer to receive a reward until spending \$2,500, so the lowest available redemption item should be equivalent to that corresponding point value (i.e., \$25). On the other side of the spectrum, this same hypothetical program may implement a maximum redemption value when, once achieved, your consumer graduates to a new platform with a new assortment and items starting at a higher value. Let's assume this spend is \$50,000, which would equate to points earned worth \$500 using the same scale as above.

Your assortment for the first "level" must obviously reflect the corresponding price point values for redemption. Items are not valued the same way to every person or for any price point, however, which is why it is important to have variety and allow for the member to make their own selection.

Consider two national program participants: the first, a female in her mid-20s living in Portland, Ore., who has an active lifestyle, and the second, a male in his early 30s who is an audiophile and travels frequently between New York and Los Angeles. They both want to redeem for headphones, but have very different priorities. Based on demographics, the for-

mer is a candidate for Skullcandy and the latter is a candidate for Klipsch.

Data can also tell us where to focus on additional areas for our assortment. Family size, for example, will influence if a toy selection should be included and if that's an important category for the program or if a small assortment would suffice.

Geography and corresponding weather patterns indicate what types of seasonal items should be included. Cold-weather products are applicable in the northern states, but would not be relevant for many southern states.

Geography can also influence your assortment when it comes to including popular and trending items based on sports teams, music, food, dance and more. An example would be the growing trend in practicing yoga, which gained popularity along the Northeast and West coasts. By 2012 yoga was being practiced by 20.4 million people across the United States, primarily females, according to a study conducted by Yoga Journal and Yoga Alliance. Gaiam, which is the leading innovator in the creation of yoga mats, props and accessories, perfectly illustrates how a regional trend grew to become a popular redemption nationally. The study also noted the significant growth for this practice since 2012 in the United States, which has increased to 36.7 million people in 2016, 28 percent of whom are male.

When it comes to food, we must be educated on pop culture trends with celebrity chefs and the tools they use to execute their recipes. Celebrity chef brands like Ken Hom, Rachael Ray and Guy Fieri all touch different demographics. Also, more and more people began to entertain at home as an effect of the recession, which caused a shift in what participants wanted to redeem for with their earned points. Brands like Juliska, which caters to the young romantics wanting to create a bohemian tablescape for their guests, or Lalique, which caters to a sophisticated palate for design and conversation pieces, have surged in popularity as a result.

We are fortunate to be in a digital age that allows us to collect demographic information from our program participants. Gaining insight into the aspirations of our members allows us to create a more robust assortment that will better influence their behaviors and achieve our own corporate goals. Knowledge is power, and the more you know about your audience the better you can connect with them.

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Ranking



By Deborah L. Vence

A HIGHER VALUE

Top Merchandise Trends Include Premium Goods, Experiential Gifting

Most industry experts concur that higher-valued or premium merchandise has increased in redemption. And, rather than selecting generic versions of products, more quality brands are being chosen for incentives.

“We are seeing that the traditional promotional products buyer is

now buying premium retail merchandise instead of the decorated promotional products,” said Scott Kookan, CEO of Links Unlimited, a Cincinnati, Ohio-based company that specializes in a full range of services, from product fulfillment to complete end-to-end solutions.

“So, instead of buying a generic pair of sunglasses and placing their company logo on the product, companies are purchasing a pair of Ray-Ban or Oakley sunglasses to use as an incentive for their customers and employees,” he said.

Merchandise Incentives

With higher-valued items increasing in redemption, categories such as major appliances and outdoor furniture sets are redeeming better than they have historically.

“This would seem to indicate that we are seeing a trend to more of

want redemption vs. the past few years seeing a need redemption,” said Eric Anderson, director of sales, PMC/Almo, a Wisconsin-based company that provides brand-name consumer electronics and merchandise to the premium incentive and special markets channels.

Merchandise continues to be a steady component in incentive programs as merchandise evolves with style change, technology influence and “want,” noted Joe Zanone, president of Zanone Sales and Movado Group Inc. authorized sales agent. “With all three of these in mind, lifestyle choices from personal electronics, espresso machines, and road gear to fashion-forward designs in jewelry, watches and handbags are leading the pack in terms of merchandise redemption,” he said.

Zanone added that a recent IRF study found that merchandise, again, is a growing segment in the incentive arena.

“People are worn down by gift cards,” he said, “and they do not have the pizzazz that opening a box with a merchandise reward has.”

Another trend that has exploded is the “event.” “Just as the merchandise catalogs started offering more and more choices, companies want to give their employees a choice of gifts when they come to a sales meeting, conference or a special event,” said Spencer Toomey, CPIM, vice president, special markets division, Revo Sunglasses, Westport, Conn.

“The days of giving everyone the same gift is over. Now they have created an event out of giving their gifts. The employees are presented a selection of merchandise. They try them on while they are with their peers, instead of in their room by themselves; make their choice, so they are invested in the decision-making; and then are handed their gift right on the spot for instant gratification,” Toomey explained. “They then spend the rest of their time at the meeting discussing their choice with their peers. The added value that you get from this is tremendous,” he added.

Experts agree that experiential or event marketing is popular. “Experiential gifting is a big trend right now,” said Brian Rivolta, senior vice president of sales, Incentive Concepts. “People are looking for new and unique ways to make gifting more of a memory and experience than just a gift. Gifting suites, brand experiences and team-building exercises are all ways that people are taking gifting to another level.”

What’s more, wellness programs have grown quickly in popularity, noted Paul Gordon, senior vice president of sales, Rymax Marketing Services Inc.

“Companies have seen the beneficial impact it has on their employees’ overall well-being,” he said.

“Focusing on wellness incentives, such as Garmin Vivoactiv, Caeden, Apple Smartwatch and more are changing the office culture, encouraging collaborations amongst employees to create healthier environments, while supporting one another,” Gordon said. “This growing trend has not only reduced medical costs for businesses, but has significantly increased employee motivation and lowered the rate of absenteeism. It’s a win-win.”

People are spending more time at work, and “Between companies needing to do more with less and technology providing a way to always be connected, employees can have a hard time disconnecting from work once they are home or away,” said Larry Rougas, national sales manager, photo specialty, Nikon Inc.

“It is important for employers to recognize this effort and also encourage a healthy life balance for their hard-working employees by offering incentives that help them enjoy their life and the things they are passionate about outside of work,” he said.

“Cameras are a great incentive option,” he added, “because they provide employees a way to capture and share the things that are most meaningful to them.”

Meanwhile, other trends include: a consistent level of bid activity;

Most industry experts concur that higher-valued or premium merchandise has increased in redemption. And, rather than selecting generic versions of products, more quality brands are being chosen for incentives.

inquiries for a range of budgets; more requests for customization (e.g., custom color, logo imprinting, special individual drop-ship handling at the recipient level); and longer-range and retail-savvy planning for holidays.

“Incentive buyers are asking about Black Friday earlier (June) and a desire for parity with retailers’ planning cycles,” noted Shelly Colla, sales manager, National Premium Incentive Group, Sony Electronics Inc.

Merchandise Trends

When it comes to merchandise itself, “We are seeing more step-up product versus, in the recent past, the entry-level product redeeming,” Anderson said. “Take, for instance, a DeLonghi coffee maker. In the past the bigger redeemer may have been the nice 12-cup insulated carafe machine. Now, they are able to redeem for the multipurpose cappuccino, espresso coffee maker.”

Anderson explained that an entry-level product is the basic unit that does just what it says, while the step-up product offers more bells and whistles.

“So, think LED TV,” he said. “Entry level would be a 40-inch LED TV with hi-def display. Then think step up: a 40-inch LED TV with hi-def display, Wi-Fi with Internet capability, small hub and improved audio sound.”

Seasonal products also are being redeemed more often than they have been historically.

“Additionally, we are seeing seasonal product redeem much better than it did historically—window A/C units, dehumidifiers, fans, etc.,” Anderson said. “Nice margin items are redeeming very well. Last year, we introduced a line of artificial Christmas trees. Many models sold out quickly. In anticipation of another great year, we are expanding the line three-fold and bringing in much more inventory.”

Trends in merchandise follow the trends in technology, too. “We have seen a growth in home automation and personal Bluetooth trackers,” Kookan said. “The Amazon Echo has put home automation on the map. Amazon Echo is a hands-free speaker you control with your voice. With Echo acting as the hub, it allows hands-free convenience with voice control. Echo connects to the Alexa Voice Service to play music, provide information, news, sports scores, weather, etc.

“In regard to Bluetooth trackers, Tile is leading the way. Tile is a tiny Bluetooth tracker and easy-to-use app that finds everyday items in seconds—like your phone, keys and wallet. Both of these prod-

The past few years have shown a shift toward luxury, with a more dramatic move occurring in the past 12 to 18 months.

ucts are seeing significant growth in the corporate channel,” he said.

Consumer electronics continue to have a strong demand, with headphone sales leading unit sales.

“As for dollar sales, consumer interest and more attractive price points on Sony Ultra 4K are dominating the higher-ticket items,” Colla said.

Others say that trends depend on the economic situation of the recipients.

“The more upscale the audience, the bigger chance that they will go for the luxury brands that have a status image,” Toomey said. “They will choose items that they have always wanted but never bought. The middle-income recipients most likely will choose more practical items that they can use in their everyday lives. However, that is not to say that they will not treat themselves to a luxury brand that they have always wanted.”

Another growing trend is the growth in popularity of home décor, kitchen, and health and wellness products.

“With all the new shows and do-it-yourself videos, home décor and kitchen have become increasingly popular for redemption awards,” Gordon said. “When individuals are on a budget, especially new homebuyers, it’s much easier for them to redeem their points for products that will benefit them in the end.”

In fact, health and wellness products are hitting the market like never before.

“They are the tech game-changers for 2016, and we are making sure they are prominent in our incentive programs,” Gordon said. “Wireless earbuds such as Jabra, as well as Garmin Vivofit, Sprii and Gaiam fitness bands and yoga products are the essentials to what’s going to make headlines in the year ahead. Fitness trackers are becoming smarter and moving beyond the wrist. They are dominating the wearable technology and it will only continue sizzling the market for years to come.”

While cameras always have been a popular incentive option, now people are taking more photos than ever before.

“Imaging companies are pushing the boundaries in advancing technologies in image quality, ease of use and sharing, making cameras an even more desirable incentive today,” Rougas said. “Nikon is on the forefront of pushing these technological boundaries by addressing consumer needs and offering features like built-in Wi-Fi and SnapBridge, making sharing easy and convenient.”

In general, lifestyle items are what people are after in today’s market.

“Electronics are always popular because of their mass appeal and versatility,” Rivolta added. “Housewares is a big category right now as well, and fashion items such as handbags and accessories are in high demand.”

A Move Toward Luxury

Most experts agree that there’s been a move toward luxury items.

“Not just pure luxury, but higher-point-value items,” Anderson said. “Participants are definitely collecting more points and, therefore, able to achieve higher-value redemptions.”

The past few years have shown a shift toward luxury, with a more dramatic move occurring in the past 12 to 18 months.

“People are starting to redeem again for what they want as opposed to what they need,” Gordon said. “Consumers want variety and what is trending—social media has really helped strengthen this desire—so no one wants just one bag or one watch any longer; the more, the better, and preferably current.”

Gary Slavonic, MAS, president, Top Brands Inc., Oshkosh, Wis., said he doesn’t know if it’s a move back toward luxury items or a stabilization of the space, but, “Luxury brands continue to resonate with a core group of recipients.”

Other experts say that luxury items have been strong for a long time.

“Without a doubt, luxury never fades,” Zanone said. “We all want the ‘it’ handbag and shoes. We all want the latest sunglasses style, watch style, the latest trending car, the best of the electronics world,” he said. “It not only shows a sense of personal accomplishment, but signifies to others our achievements.”

And, “Just look at all of the best brand-name products that are doing well in incentive programs. Even when the economy slows down, luxury items are still offered,” Toomey said. “The programs may be smaller, but they maintain the quality of the merchandise.”

Similarly, Colla said she sees modest growth in the luxury arena.

“Incentive program managers are not only spending more on higher end goods and the latest technology (e.g., Ultra 4K TVs, DSLR/Mirror-Less Cameras),” she said. But, “they are sensitive to providing a comprehensive ‘experience’ for their gift recipient. This includes extras such as arranging custom installation for Ultra 4K products.”

With incentive options, people always have gravitated toward luxury items that they wouldn’t necessarily purchase for themselves.

“Giving individuals more premium options to choose from makes them feel accomplished and appreciated,” Rougas said.

“Today, people are capturing photos of everything from their passions and hobbies to special moments with family. They are starting to outgrow their smartphone cameras and really desire better quality photos of those things that matter most to them,” he said. “Because of this, cameras are becoming a more desirable luxury incentive option.”

Rivolta noted that “The demographic of the recipient is shifting, and the feedback that our customers are getting is that millennials value the recognition that comes along with merchandise incentives.”

On the other hand, Kookien said he doesn’t see a trend moving back to luxury.

“The old model for loyalty and incentive programs was to offer aspirational merchandise,” he said. “The popular opinion at the time was to offer products that most people would not spend their money on, but that they would use their program points or receive these products as an incentive.

“We have seen an overlap between retail shopping behavior and corporate incentive buying behavior,” he added. “Now, people want what is trending or the merchandise that is relevant in their everyday lives.”

What’s Popular?

Plenty of merchandise continues to be popular, including lifestyle items.

“People like to receive items they can make use of,” Slavonic said.

For PMC/Almo, outdoor furniture, home décor and fitness products are popular. “This year we are seeing some excellent trends in these categories,” Anderson said.

Similarly, Gordon said, “home décor, kitchen, and health and wellness products are booming in popularity and will only continue to grow throughout the next several years.”

Home automation and Bluetooth tracking devices also are popular.

“However, there are items that are consistent top sellers, including personal accessories (sunglasses) and electronics (headphones),” Kookien said.

Popular items include Bluetooth headphones (on-ear, over-ear, noise cancelling), Bluetooth speakers, 2K and Ultra 4K TVs and higher-end digital cameras, Colla said.

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Home décor, kitchen, and health and wellness products are booming in popularity and will only continue to grow throughout the next several years.

In fact, Rivolta said his company's most popular items right now are electronics, specifically the Bluetooth category.

"We are fortunate to represent a leader in the category, and whether it's headphones or speakers, the convenience of wireless technology is something that almost everyone wants to have," he said.

"Anything tech-driven to improve lifestyle" is popular, Zanone said. "Smart cars, smartwatches, tech wearables, all combined to motivate you to do more," he said. "Outdoor lifestyle is really big as well—camping, gardening, fishing, running and hiking, you name it. Outdoor is a big component to merchandise trends, along with tech items like motion measurement, heart monitor, sleep monitor and easily accessible coaching tips."

From an imaging perspective, DSLR cameras, like the Nikon D3300 and Nikon D5500, are popular options. "These cameras produce beautiful high-quality photos and video and with Nikon's SnapBridge technology, photos can be shared easily to compatible smartphones or tablets," Rougas said. "Also popular are items such as premium binoculars for those who take their leisure in the field or at sea, and laser rangefinders for those who enjoy a relaxing day on the green."

Program Innovations

In the area of program innovations, technology is leading the way. "If you are not able to provide and accept real-time information,

you will be out of business in the near future," Kookien said. "We allow our customers and vendors to connect with us electronically in many ways, including web services, EDI, Flat file and Auto Order."

Kookien's company sends out orders within 24 hours and offers custom services such as kitting options, labels with customers' logos and unique packing solutions. "This technology allows us to be as flexible as possible for our customers," he said. "We do not have a 'cookie-cutter' approach. We begin every relationship with what works best for each specific customer or vendor. We strive to make our customers' jobs easier for them."

Smaller footprint, higher item spend experiential events showcasing the hottest new technology make up some program innovations, Colla noted.

"This includes not only the items available to the gift recipient, but upcoming technologies and products, and education on the latest trends," she said.

Zanone noted that "travel-related programs are so very much now about the experience of not only the location, but also adding a charitable component used for team building in your travel market. Experience-driven programs are leading the way."

Noting that he sees two trends in this area, Gordon said, "We are finally seeing the Internet and social media successfully track and create incentives in a very deep and unique way toward the participant. The ability to track on multiple levels and then deliver relevant rewards furthers our ability to segment and concentrate the market beyond obvious demographics."

Although luxury items are becoming more popular, Rougas said more companies are providing programs that offer items in a range of price points.

"Nikon offers not only a suite of cameras that would meet various needs and price points, but also binoculars and laser rangefinders for employees who enjoy leisure time," he said.

The Economic Impact

If the economy has had any effect on the industry recently, it's been positive, overall, experts say.

"We say this at every little and big downturn in the economy—incentives work!" Zanone said. "With the travel incentive industry trending up, merchandise incentives growing at double digits and the

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workforce in disarray, I would say that, ‘yes’, the economy is lifting the use of incentives.”

The major positive impact will be felt in the future—when people have banked a lot of points and really redeem, Anderson believes.

“This being an election year ... we know many participants and companies are standing ground on new [initiatives]. I think we will see a nice influx of opportunities after the election and people get back in their comfort zone,” he said.

Slavonic said business continues a solid trend. “We still see a lot of activity, quoting, that type of thing,” he said. “With this being an election cycle, we are also seeing a little more caution in some of the decision-making, delaying a few decisions, waiting to see how things will turn out.”

There definitely is an increase in merchandise bid activities from all incentive channels (corporate gifting, casino, loyalty, sales incentives and customer events) with budgets across the board. “Again, the buyers are definitely price savvy and planning lead times are longer, but we believe this will translate into a strong calendar Q4 for merchandise rewards,” Colla said.

Rivolta doesn’t believe the economy is quite the concern that it was a few years ago.

“Budgets have opened back up in a lot of areas,” he said. “I think what we have seen is when companies reenter the gifting and incentive space they are using those dollars in a different way in order to maximize the impact of their investment.”

Still, many brands and categories in the retail market are slow.

“There is a lot of uncertainty in the retail market. This can have a positive effect on the incentive market because people can get the brands that they want in their incentive programs,” Toomey said.

“Having a specific item that you have always wanted, [and is] available to you if you overachieve at your job, is a great motivator,” he added. “Cash will never have the same effect as seeing the exact item you have always wanted and knowing what you have to do to achieve it.”

While Kooken said the economy does not appear to be affecting the industry, he noted that there are changes in programs that affect merchandise in the corporate market.

“On the loyalty side, different programs change strategies that affect true merchandise sales,” he said. “These programs sometimes switch to offering gift cards or even cash back instead of the tradi-

The employees who are motivated and feel appreciated are the ones who perform the best.

tional merchandise offering. However, in the long run we believe most programs will return to merchandising.”

Reward redemptions continue to remain strong and grow year after year.

“Employees enjoy rewards and recognition in exchange for work performance,” Gordon said. “With employee retention being crucial, it’s quite essential to satisfy them to stay with your company for as long as possible, especially when the economy is down. More employee incentive programs need to be incorporated with a points program similar to those of a credit card company.”

Certain types of behavior or successes result in a certain amount of points that later can be redeemed for a product of an employee’s interest.

“Providing employees perks, such as an incentive program or wellness program, will not only benefit your employees in the end, but your company as well,” Gordon said. “When the economy drops and people are trying to save money, they can earn the products they have been saving for with the points they have achieved in the company. It boosts employee motivation and saves them money at the same time. They work harder for their points and the products they want to earn.”

Regardless of the economy, the employees who are motivated and feel appreciated are the ones who perform the best.

“When the economy is strong, more companies participate in and expand their incentive offerings. When the going gets tough, incentives might be one of the first areas to be cut,” Rougas said. “But companies should realize that [an] employee’s disposable income may be affected at this time,” he added, “so it is important for employers to keep a strong incentive program that continues to boost morale and retention.”

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Trending Up,

A person in a dark blue suit and light blue tie is holding a black pen. The pen is pointing at a large red arrow that starts from the bottom left and trends upwards to the right. Below the arrow is a bar chart with seven light blue bars of increasing height. The background is a solid dark blue.

The Stunning Post-Recession Rise of the Reward & Recognition Industry

Since the economic downturn in 2008, when the Great Recession crippled American markets, leading to widespread corporate budget tightening, including cutbacks in funds allocated to reward and recognition programs, growth in the non-cash incentive market has been on a remarkable comeback—with trend lines showing a strong

upward growth trajectory, according to an Incentive Marketplace Estimate Research study recently released by the Incentive Federation. With 84 percent of U.S. businesses spending \$90 billion annually on award points, gift cards, trips and travel, and merchandise, the Incentive Federation study also found that overall the busi-

2016

By Rick Dandes

nesses spend \$14.4 billion annually on incentive travel and \$75.6 billion on award points, merchandise and gift cards to reward sales staff, employees, channel partners and customers.

In addition, the Incentive Research Foundation (IRF) Fall Pulse Survey 2015 "... confirmed that the non-cash incentives market grew a remarkable 17 percent since our last market estimate study in 2013," said IRF president Melissa Van Dyke.

The purpose of the 2015 Incentive Federation survey was to collect data from a national sample of nearly 1,400 business executives in order to estimate the current size and characteristics of the non-cash incentives marketplace. Some of the results even surprised Van Dyke and IRF Chief Researcher Rodger Stotz.

"When the economy dipped in 2008-2009," Van Dyke said, "the net

number of individuals who were decreasing their budget was much stronger for incentive travel than it was for merchandise and gift cards. It was fascinating. Incentive travel was very responsive to the economy. Gift cards and merchandise are less responsive to the economy. They certainly rise and fall with GDP and expectations of GDP, but not as much as incentive travel. So, when the economy began to rebound, and we started to have growth in 2010 (2 percent growth in GDP) that same year, with gift cards we had more positives than negatives, in terms of people increasing rather than decreasing their budget." It took travel longer to come back from the recession.

It also appears, Stotz added, that a third of this marketplace is driven by smaller businesses (\$1 to \$10 million in annual revenue), whose budgets may be tighter, but whose total volume generates \$29 billion a year, and firms with up to \$100 million in revenue accounting for 84 percent of the total spent on non-cash incentives. (See Figure 1.)

The bottom line, Stotz said, "... is we're seeing an increase in the percentage of companies that are using non-cash merchandise. What was once an alternative reward is now becoming more mainstream. The employee market and the focus on engagement and recognition has really increased with the number of companies and the volume of awards being used."

The increase, he added, is also a reflection of the economy. "Sure, a lot of things go together," Stotz said. "There is interconnection. But the increase appears to be greater than even before the recession, so that is what is exciting."

Incentive Federation Managing Director Steve Slagle made some other observations:

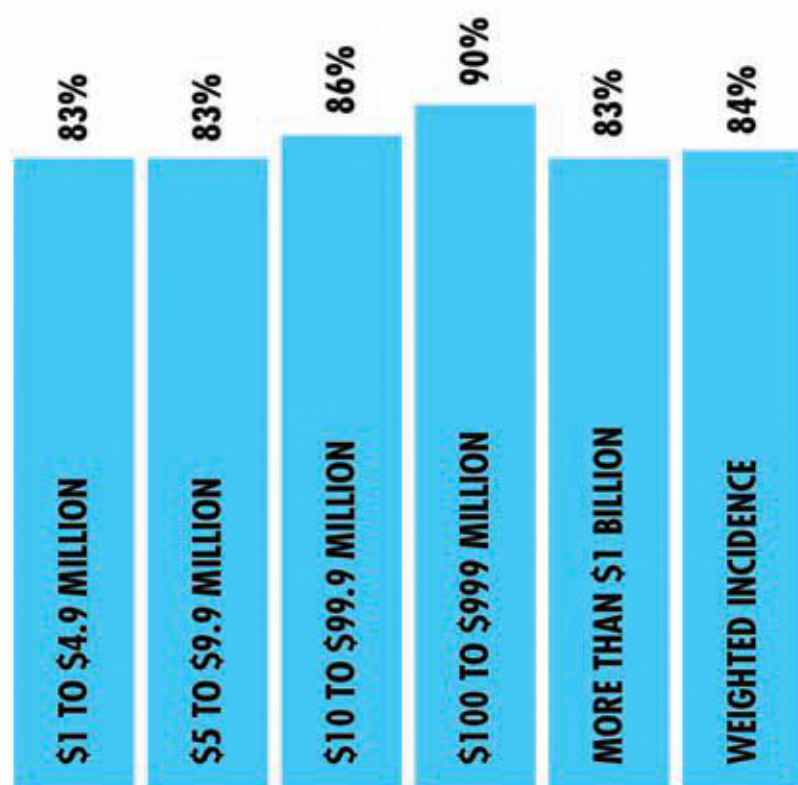
- Employee rewards and corporate gifts are the most prevalent forms of non-cash incentives, with 72 percent of businesses having both types of programs.
- Non-cash sales incentive programs are present in three of five U.S. businesses, and non-cash customer loyalty programs are used in 45 percent of firms, while 41 percent of firms use non-cash channel programs.
- Merchandise, Slagle said, has been a staple of the incentive marketplace for many years. Initially there might have been concerns that as gift cards grew in popularity, merchandise might be left behind, but actually it works to their benefit. "A lot of redemption on gift cards is for merchandise in the special markets area of the brand companies," Slagle said.
- The incidence of firms using non-cash rewards to thank clients, prospects and partners increased by 36 percent from 2013 to 2015. And the change was consistent across firm size. This increase is offset, however, by a decrease in reported spend in this category. The net impact of these changes is a larger number of firms utilizing non-cash items as appreciation, but a decrease in overall spend in the market—down 32 percent to \$10.5 billion. (See Figure 2.)

Gift cards are the most prevalent reward type in all programs except customer loyalty, Slagle said, which has a similarly high incidence of award points. Trips and travel is highest within sales programs and lowest within customer loyalty. Merchandise use is highest in channel programs. Gift card growth over the past 10 years has been pretty phenomenal, and that is reflected by the number of companies that are currently providing some type of gift card product or programs for clients.

Some of the reasons that gift cards are becoming more prolific, said Ira Ozer, president, Engagement Partners, of Chappaqua, N.Y., are:

- Selection: Gift cards from retailers generally provide more selection than incentive catalogs, with far more choices in each category—for example, dozens of coffee makers instead of just a few.
- Flexibility: Gift cards can be used online, in-store or given as gifts for others to use, giving more flexibility to the participant.
- Retail Brand Experience: In addition to the brand recognition of

FIGURE 1: Incidence of Non-Cash Incentives



merchandise items, such as Sony, Samsung, Levi's, etc., gift cards also provide the brand recognition of the retailer, such as Best Buy, The Gap and their associated online and in-store shopping experiences.

- **Timing:** Gift card distribution companies such as Blackhawk and retailers such as Amazon have created advanced technology that allows incentive companies to integrate directly with their fulfillment systems to issue digital cards and codes in real time. So there's no need to wait for the merchandise item to arrive by mail in a week or more, when you can pick it up in store on the same day if you choose.

The impact of this trend, Ozer said, is that incentive companies are now being routinely asked to add gift cards to their catalogs, even though industry research indicates that the motivational impact of tangible merchandise items can be greater than dollar-denominated gift cards. This is a huge economic shift from the way many incentive companies have been run for decades, which especially affects incentive agencies and distributors with their own warehouses and the associated overhead, since incentive companies must now charge sponsoring companies fees for gift card fulfillment and program administration.

"All of this," Ozer said, "is pushing incentive companies to charge for their incentive program management platforms at higher rates than before, especially incentive companies that historically would

give away the incentive platform for free because they were earning their margins on the merchandise. Leading incentive agencies and technology companies are now charging clients on a per-user, per-month basis, just as other SaaS (software as a service) companies, which is helping increase the profits they have lost from the shift to gift cards. And leading incentive distributors are providing faster fulfillment rates along with personalized customer service and client-branded award packaging, which adds value to the program that retailers cannot provide."

Tracking Trends: What Are the Rewards?

A trend noted by both Ozer and the IRF is a return to luxury awards. "We have watches and electronics much higher as desired awards," Van Dyke said. "But now we've seen a return to luxury on the merchandise front, and a relative stability for merchandise and gift cards, with non-cash awards becoming more and more a part of an organization's portfolio."

Another trend is an increase in per-person spending, Van Dyke said. "The growth in the overall industry is evident in our research, but we are also seeing per-person spending in gift cards, and that curve has been trending up in the past couple of years."

Last year, Van Dyke explained, IRF did a participant experience study, "... and that is where we did some sophisticated marketing research. We went out to individuals and asked them about their entire reward experience and made them make trade-offs in what they wanted. We showed them different scenarios and asked which ones do you like, more or less? And through that series of questions, we learned what really mattered most to them. They were able to trade off who was being recognized, how they were being recognized and what awards they received and what rewards were meaningful to them. What was interesting is it got us closer to what people really value."

The results were surprising.

"When we looked to see whether there was a difference in what millennials wanted vs. everyone else, we could not find any break by age group that was statistically significant," Van Dyke said. "We could not find any data that concluded, yes, millennials like gift cards more, or yes, millennials wanted a certain type of merchandise. What did change in how people wanted to be rewarded and recognized is when we started to look at the people's work location, preferences about working at home vs. office."

For generational differences research showed nothing statistically significant at the 95 percent level. For example, millennials have slightly more interest in clothing than gen X or baby boomers. Boomers were a bit more interested in watches and clocks than gen X or millennials, Van Dyke said. Everyone had a strong interest in gift cards.

Challenges Ahead

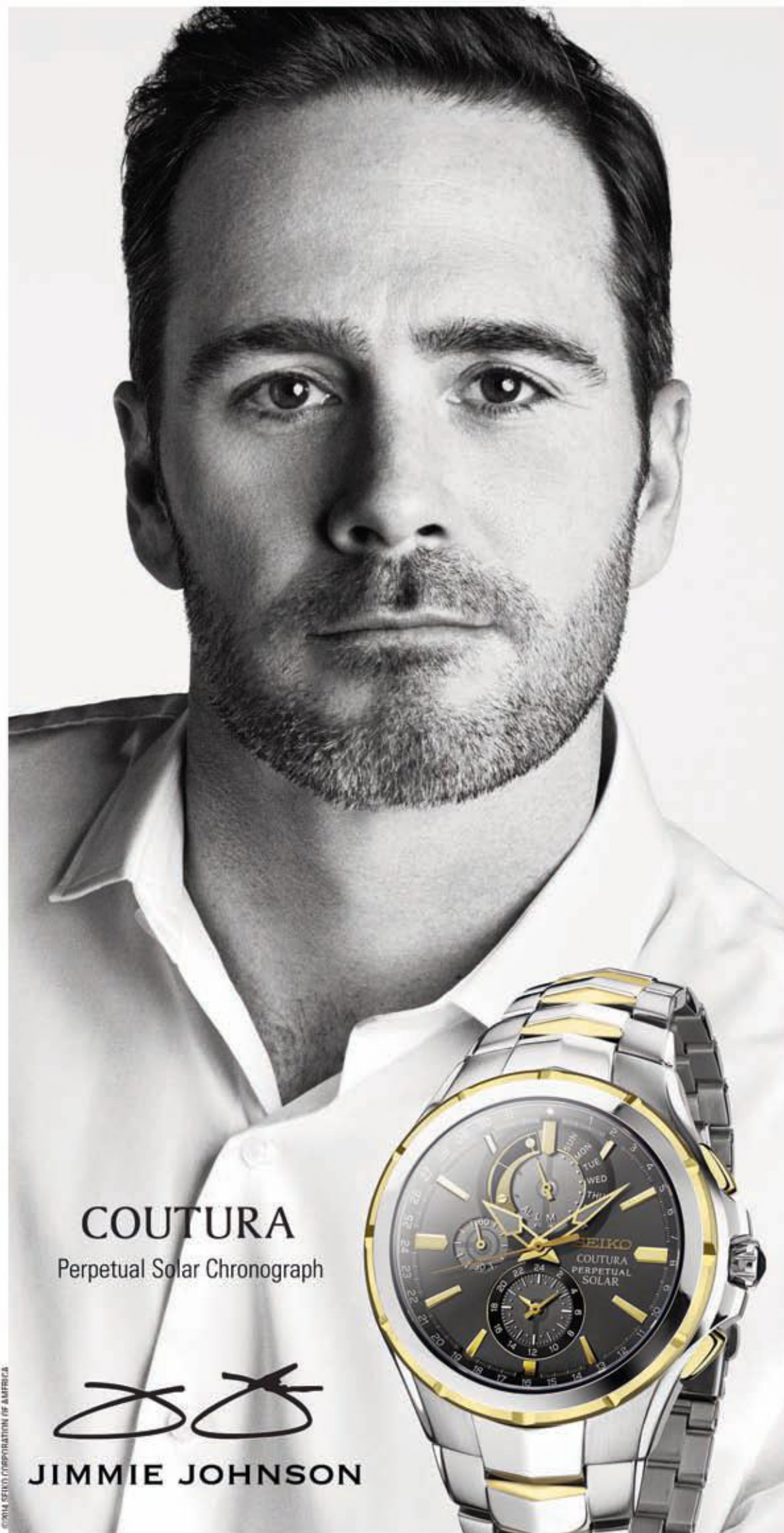
No doubt, there are great and numerous opportunities for growth in the incentive industry. But there are serious challenges as well, Van Dyke said. Tracking where items are purchased is an issue facing

Anticipated Changes in Non-Cash Incentive Program Budgets for This Year

- 46 percent of respondents anticipate an increase in non-cash incentive programs in the coming year.
- 48 percent of respondents anticipate budgets for non-cash incentive programs will "remain unchanged" this coming year.

- 7 percent indicate that budgets for non-cash incentive programs will decrease by some degree in the coming year.

Source: IRF 2015 Pulse Survey



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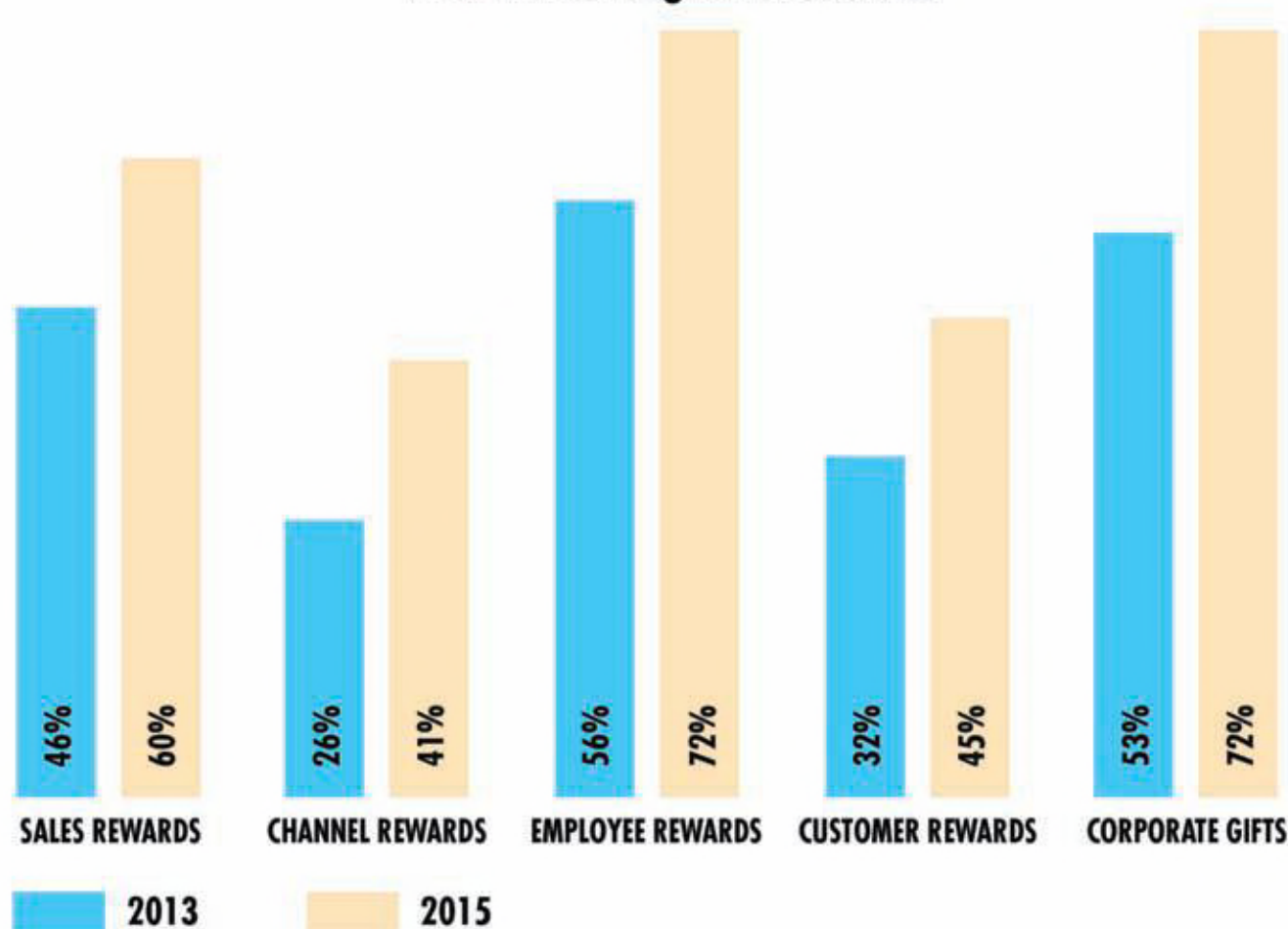
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FIGURE 2: Program Audiences



program designers and product buyers.

“For example,” Stotz said, “as we see gift cards and point systems growing in volume, the challenge is, where are the end-user buyers, the corporate buyers, purchasing them? Or, how are those points being redeemed? Are they being redeemed through a retail store? Online? A special online catalog? It is challenging to figure out exactly where that volume is going. It is becoming more difficult than it used to be to track where items are being purchased.”

“That gives special markets a major challenge in terms of promoting products for their brand,” Stotz said. Sales, which used to be tracked through specific channels, are being distributed through

many channels.

In recent years, there has also been a shift in how human capital is viewed. Now, within corporate executive boards, the number-one issue for CEOs is human capital. “It has been that way for the last three years,” Van Dyke noted, “far exceeding their interest in cost reduction or operational efficiency. There is a huge portion of the U.S. market that sees the value of their business not in their factories they own or products they produce, but in their intellectual and human capital property.”

Now is the time for everyone to get much deeper into program design, she said. “Our challenge at IRF is to help those individuals who run those programs day in and day out to create stronger programs, know what types of design patterns work and don’t work, since now we have such a large portion of the U.S. market using these tools.”

There is a movement away from “do this, get that” programs to a more holistic approach regarding the entire performance journey. The journey doesn’t stop

with the end of the program and issuance of awards. For the designer, the end point is used as a launching pad, in terms of what is coming next, as well as the impact on the overall business or certain parts of the business, “... and how it has created what I would call intangible results,” Van Dyke said “Program design has changed quite a bit.”

Understanding Program Design and Planning

Melissa Van Dyke is right, noted Mike Ryan, senior vice president, Client Strategy, Madison Performance, New York. Things have changed. As a trend, “The generational strategy is something that just about every organization is focused on these days, and it will continue,” he said. “What is important for companies to understand is there certainly are differences in what different generations expect when it comes to being recognized and when it comes to the perception of opportunity within the organization. Many people are focused on younger workers, as they should be. They are rapidly becoming the majority of the workforce.”

What’s interesting about younger workers, however, is they like to be recognized more often than older employees. “We all suspected that,” Ryan said. “One of the reasons is not that they are insecure; it’s that they have a definitive need to know that they are on the right path, in terms of where they wanted to be. Many organizations are reinventing their programs that are normally designed to reward for service longevity. They are keeping them for older employees that have already eclipsed the five-, 10-, 15-year barriers, and there is good reason for that. Those employees are outstanding role models and illustrate what success looks like over time, but for younger employees they are creating programs that provide more ongoing feedback in terms of relevant skills, new certification and new skills being acquired.”

It’s important to have many different disciplines within organizations. Call this trend horizontal leadership, which basically means that you can step in as an individual and provide leadership, even

Budget Changes for Incentive Program Elements

Impact on Incentive Program As A Result Of the Current Economic Conditions:

- 51 percent of respondents anticipate no changes to the budget for incentive programs in the coming year as a result of the recent economic conditions.
- 30 percent indicate that budgets for incentive programs have increased as a result of the recent economic conditions.
- 9 percent indicate that that budgets for incentive programs have been reduced as a result of the recent economic conditions.
- 6 percent indicate no budget change, but reduced the component and added or increased a merchandise incentive program component.
- 3 percent indicated no budget change, but replaced the travel incentive.

Source: IRF 2015 Pulse Survey

when you are not technically in charge. That is important because when employees work on ad hoc project groups or they work across different disciplines trying to solve a problem, it is important for people to step up, Ryan said.

“Millennials not only want those types of opportunities to be heard and to be influential, but they seize them. And they know that leadership isn’t just about being in charge, it’s about charging up others,” he added. “Those are some of the things organizations are sensitive to, and some things that organizations are planning for when it comes to structuring their recognition programs.”

Then there is the issue of talent poaching, Ryan said. “You see it in a lot of key industries—especially in technical, but it is really rampant in every industry that needs a good portion of the best talent-driven professionals out there. Companies won’t say they have talent poaching strategies, but with tools that are available in the marketplace today, such as social networking sites, it is easy to recruit via the internet.

“When you look at what companies are doing to prevent their best from being poached, they are making sure they have social recognition tools in place, where employees who are positive apostles of the organizations are able to speak internally with other employees. They are able to give recognition, they are able to do good work. They are able to chime in when others have gotten rewards. They’re trying to raise the bar on the culture of appreciation within the company. The object is to keep it an environment where people don’t feel that they are being ignored, or don’t know how their contributions



contribute to the organization’s efforts. Therefore, they don’t feel restless and are not susceptible to poaching.”

Inside the C-suite, executives know that recognition is a viable part of the compensation, but there is a trend now that has marketing and HR partnering on what marketing needs to get out of recognition. “They need to improve their brand’s authenticity in the marketplace,” Ryan said. “They need to improve customer satisfaction scores—positive word-of-mouth. The pivot point on all that is people.” **PIP**

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Reward Your Winners



By Emily Tipping

Recreation & Sporting Goods to Motivate Top Performance

Now that we've shut down the lights on another round of Olympic Games, it's time to look back to ourselves and see what kind of winners we can encourage and become. The Olympics often give rise to increasing interest in certain sports, but the fact is, most people have a favorite activity, hobby or sport, and when you want to cultivate gold-medal winners at your organization, one of the best tools in your coaching pocket is incentives that help them reach their active and recreational goals, and fill up their leisure time with fun and rewarding activities.

Whether it's supporting family fun in the great outdoors through games, canoes and camping packages, supporting a new fitness goal with trackers and bikes, or upping their game with golf gadgets and gear, you know that rewarding with rec and sporting goods is a smart strategy to keep you in the game of improving performance.

"It really boils down to the fun factor," said Chad Glamann, marketing manager for Top Brands Inc. "Rec and sporting goods are a blast to use! This category has products that are all about getting outside, destressing and enjoying time with family and friends. That is a really powerful motivator for any recipient."

"As a culture, we are pulled in more directions than ever, and we are busier than ever," added Brian Rivolta, senior vice president of sales, Incentive Concepts. "We use our down time to reinvest in ourselves through activities we enjoy—shooting baskets with our kids or playing a game of bag toss in the back yard with our family. We are maxed out with things to do, and we want to max out our leisure time as well."

This always-popular category of incentive and reward merchandise has mass appeal largely because it covers so many of the things we love to do. From favorite sports and hobbies to tailgating and just throwing a ball around in the yard with friends and family, there's something here for everyone.

New trends in this area are being driven largely by the growing awareness of what excites the millennial generation, as well as our increasing "connectedness" via social media and other technology tools.

"Millennials are the largest generation in the history of the United States and are reaching prime spending age," Rivolta explained. "This is a very active and social group of consumers, and we are seeing a surge in social-oriented categories such as outdoor games. Additionally, we are seeing a huge trend in connected devices and the advent of using technology to connect our physical activity to the virtual world."

Health & Wellness

Before we get to the socially connected fun provided by community bike rides and group games, let's look at that trend of connectedness. More and more people are using their devices—smartphones, smart watches and more—to keep track of their daily activity and other health-focused stats. This, in turn, has led some companies to incorporate tools like fitness trackers and more into programs that specifically focus on encouraging physical activity and other get-healthy goals.

"Wearable technology continues to be in high demand and is arguable the most 'viral' product to hit this category in the past 10 years," Glamann said. "Companies continue to refine and add features to make sure these products continue to innovate and have

Rewarding with recreation and sporting goods is a smart strategy to keep you in the game of improving performance.

staying power.

"Health and wellness programs across the country are also utilizing fitness bands of all types to encourage their employees to track their activity and push toward a healthier lifestyle," he added.

Rivolta agreed that there is a big focus on wellness and healthy lifestyles, which can be supported by more than just fitness trackers.

"There is definitely a renewed focus on wellness programs and a trend toward active, healthy lifestyles," he said. "Many of our customers have been drawn to items such as the Bose SoundSport Wireless headphones to pair with their mobile device and are great to use while walking, running, cycling and even lifting weights."

In Style

When it comes to athletic gear and apparel, more and more people are getting on board with the latest styles. According to Dennis Borst, president and COO of Patriot Marketing Group, which represents Foot Locker gift cards in the incentive market, Foot Locker's ads might be targeted toward urban males between 14 and 29 years old, "... but the truth is that everybody now wears athletic shoes, and everybody's wearing athletic apparel. The demographic appeal is much wider these days."

Because of this, he said that there has been a tremendous proliferation of interest in the Foot Locker gift cards he provides to the incentive market. "Although a lot of it has to do with programs that include e-cards and cards that can be sent to a phone, I think equally as important is the trend—and everybody's saying it's here to stay—of the increase in wearing ath-leisure apparel and athletic chic, and it being acceptable to be worn just about everywhere," Borst said.

"Lady Foot Locker and Foot Locker have both increased the amount of apparel they offer in the past five years," he added. "I think with what is going on with sports and leisure and recreation, the wearing of the right apparel is as important as wearing the right shoes. We're seeing programs that are buying Foot Locker as much for the apparel as the shoes."

Get Moving

While golf has traditionally held one of the top spots in this area of the market, other sports and activities are trending upward, and can boast much broader appeal. And whether it's rolling on two or four wheels or paddling along a coastline or down a river, providing people the opportunity to get moving under their own steam encourages healthy activity with a fun and fulfilling reward.

"Fat tire mountain bikes are really trending right now," Glamann said. "This style of mountain bike has wide rims and extra-large tires for additional traction on rugged terrain—even snow. The bigger tires really increase rolling momentum as well, and make for a fun ride. Top Brands carries the 3.0 Tyrant series from Huffy that has been very popular in this category."

For those who live in the city or who are using their bike to commute around town, **Cycle Force Group offers STRIDA**, a portable, belt-driven folding bicycle with a distinctive 'A'-shaped collapsible frame, designed in the U.K. Aimed at commuters and city dwellers whose storage space



PHOTO
COURTESY
OF CYCLE
FORCE GROUP

might be limited, STRIDA is designed to be simple to use, quick to fold and easy to maintain. The STRIDA EVO has an aluminum frame with 18-inch alloy wheels, reflective tires for extra safety, front and rear disc brakes for easy stopping, and a special belt drive for up to 50,000 miles of use. The bike weighs in at 29 pounds and can accommodate riders from 4 feet 9 inches to 6 feet 4 inches. It also comes with a rear carrier rack, and is available in Neon Yellow, Blue, and Brush Silver. The STRIDA EVO uses the latest innovation of an internal three-speed gear system that is integrated into the bottom portion of the bike, allowing you to shift gears by simply pedaling backwards, leaving the bicycle free of additional external components and turning this folding bike into a refined piece of moving art.

Adding bikes to your program will be particularly attractive to millennials. "According to the Physical Activity Council, millennials are the most active and healthy generation, with almost half involved in high-calorie-burning activities," Glamann said. "Community bike rides are gaining in popularity among this generation and are viewed as a great social outlet, as well as an opportunity to get in some exercise, so expect the demand for bicycles to remain strong."

PHOTO COURTESY
OF BIKE USA



skateboard measures 31 by 8 inches.

And, for those who prefer to get going on the water instead of the road or bike path, **Zane's offers the Old Town Vapor 10 Kayak.** The Vapor 10 offers a stable, efficient and comfortable ride. It features an amply cushioned, quick-drying seat that flexes when you paddle and a molded-in paddle rest. It also features a molded-in cup holder, thigh pads, molded-in day well, built-in handles and adjustable foot braces. At 10 feet long, it has a capacity of 325 pounds.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ZANES



Speaking of the Great Outdoors...

People don't just want to get moving on foot, wheels or water in the great outdoors; they also want to pursue other popular hobbies like watching wildlife, fishing, and camping with family and friends.

"Outdoor activities have always had a strong appeal with award winners," Glamann said. "Everybody likes to envision themselves as an athlete or outdoorsman, and products in this category really help them to live out their dreams. Any product that encourages the winner to stay active, motivated and enjoy open spaces always redeems well."

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For those who love getting a closer view, **Bushnell offers the 10x50 Trophy Xtreme Binocular.** Dollar for dollar, it's the most clarity available today. The rugged armor plate encases fully multi-coated lenses in a waterproof, fogproof vault of impenetrability. The aggressive, ergonomic design makes for easy handling. Larger objective lenses with higher magnification deliver best-in-class clarity and brightness.

Fisherfolk will love **Shimano's Curado I, available through Coast Fulfillment.** It's the fishing industry's go-to low-profile bait-casting reel for both fresh and saltwater. This reel is equipped with five stainless ball bearings, X-Ship for greater gear durability, SVS Infinity Brake System and Shimano Stable Spool Design, leading to significantly reduced spool vibration. It retrieves 23 inches to 30 inches of line per crank (varies by model), and is offered in three gear ratios of your choice. This model should be part of every fisherman's terminal tackle.



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OF COAST
FULFILLMENT

When they're ready to call it a day and relax after hiking and fishing to their hearts' content, they'll love the **Weekender Camping Package from Coleman.** It features one 7-by-7-foot Go! Tent with rainfly and easy setup, a two-burner propane stove with independently adjustable 7,000 BTU burners, two warm-weather sleeping bags with built-in storage bags and a 45-can



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collapsible cooler with bottle opener and adjustable shoulder strap. The products in this package can also be imprinted with your logo or message at an additional charge, making it great for reminding customers and other program participants that your company or organization is supporting their favorite outdoor pursuits.

When you have a lot of people enjoying the outdoors together, you need a bigger tent. **The Wenzel Blue Ridge 7, available through Coast Fulfillment**, sleeps seven with plenty of headroom. Perfect for camping with a group, the roomy Blue Ridge 7-person tent is a great companion no matter where you decide to set it up. Smartly designed with multi-diameter poles for more headroom and hooped fly pole over the door for extra rain protection. There's also a removable divider curtain that creates two separate sleeping areas.



Just Playing Around

“Outdoor games are hugely popular right now at all price points,” Rivolta said. “We see that some consumers are definitely interested in the tried-and-true games at value price points, and we are also seeing consumers gravitating to higher-end products. We have seen increased redemption in our price-point-driven brands such as Triumph, as well as our brands that are on the higher end, such as Viva Sol.”

Outside or inside, games like bag tosses, table tennis and billiards are a great addition to any yard or rumpus room, and there are plenty of options available to fit your budget and your program participants.

Available through Incentive Concepts, the **Triumph Sports Pop-A-Shots** features durable steel tube construction with black powder coating, and a frame that folds for easy storage. It is quick and easy to assemble, requiring no tools. Additional features include: mechanical arm with electronic display scoring, sturdy red powder-coated rim with black nylon net, and printed (no decals!) customiz-



People don't just want to get moving on foot, wheels or water in the great outdoors; they also want to pursue other popular hobbies like watching wildlife, fishing, and camping with family and friends.

able backboard with your logo graphics. Also available through Incentive Concepts, the **Stiga Daytona Indoor Table Tennis Table** features the regulation-style edge banding and silk-screened striping with corner protection pads. The patented design features 5/8-inch black top playing surface and 1-inch steel apron for extra table support and 1-inch round steel tube legs for stability. This table tennis table also features rigid unibody chassis for added strength and 3 mag wheel casters. The two wheels have brakes for mobility and stability. This table has built-in ball storage for convenient storage and portability. A net and post are included.



Spectators Are Special, Too!

Not everyone wants to get out and play a sport, but a vast number of people love to watch everything from baseball and football to soccer, hockey and more. For these folks, tailgating has become almost an Olympic event itself. OK, maybe not, but outfitting yourself for a fun day of tailgating can be just as rewarding if it's your favorite thing to do during the season.

“Tailgating products continue to have great staying power and



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One of the most important things to remember when offering recreation and sporting goods as part of your program is to give your participants plenty of options.

redeem very well in programs,” Glamann said. “Top Brands carries the Tailgaterz line of furniture and accessories. From collapsible bars and buffets to organizers and folding coolers, this innovative line has products that will improve any game experience.”

For those who are looking for a smart solution to carry their tasty snacks and beverages, the **YETI Hopper 40**, available through **Links Unlimited**, is the perfect choice. Designed to carry big food-and-beverage cargoes with ease, it has the capacity to carry 36 cans with ice. It is made with the same heavy-duty DryHide construction and leak-proof HydroLok Zipper that make these soft-sided coolers anything but soft. Take it with you to the bonfire, to the mountains, on your next hunting trip or any time you need to carry a larger load in a portable package.

All About the Extras

Of course, outfitting your program participants for their favorite leisure-time activities doesn't stop with those activities themselves. There are other tools and products that can help support them in their favorite sports or pastimes, too. Bike carriers, action cameras and more will keep the fun going.

“Top Brands has just added the Car Top Cargo from Impact Plastics to our lineup of outdoor and recreation products,” Glamann said. “This rooftop carrier is a big hit with outdoor enthusiasts who like the flexibility to store camping equipment, golf clubs and other gear for a cross-country road trip or a weekend getaway and free up space in their vehicle.”

The sturdy and rugged **Car Top Cargo** features 18 cubic feet of storage space, perfect for a cross-country road trip or weekend getaway. The carrier fits easily on top of almost all factory and after-market cross rail systems. Patent-pending hinge design makes for easy and convenient assembly and storage, and no tools are needed for installation. The Car Top Cargo is also made in the USA and comes with a lifetime limited warranty. Give award winners the freedom to get their gear out of the car and onto the roof to free up space for what's really important—family and friends.



PHOTO COURTESY OF TOP BRANDS



PHOTO COURTESY OF D&H

Available through **D&H**, the **TomTom Bandit Action Camera** is the first-ever 4K HD action camera with a build-in media server, letting users edit their videos without having to download first. This unit is waterproof up to 165 feet without an additional case.

Let Them Choose

One of the most important things to remember when offering recreation and sporting goods as part of your program is to give your participants plenty of options. Everyone's tastes differ, and you don't want anyone to feel left on the sidelines.

“We are paying specific attention to the millennials as they are the largest generation ever and are most dynamic in terms of their requirements,” Rivolta said. “They require authenticity, as they want their experiences to be real, and as a first generation of digital natives, they know how to use the available tools through their smartphones to do product comparisons and determine





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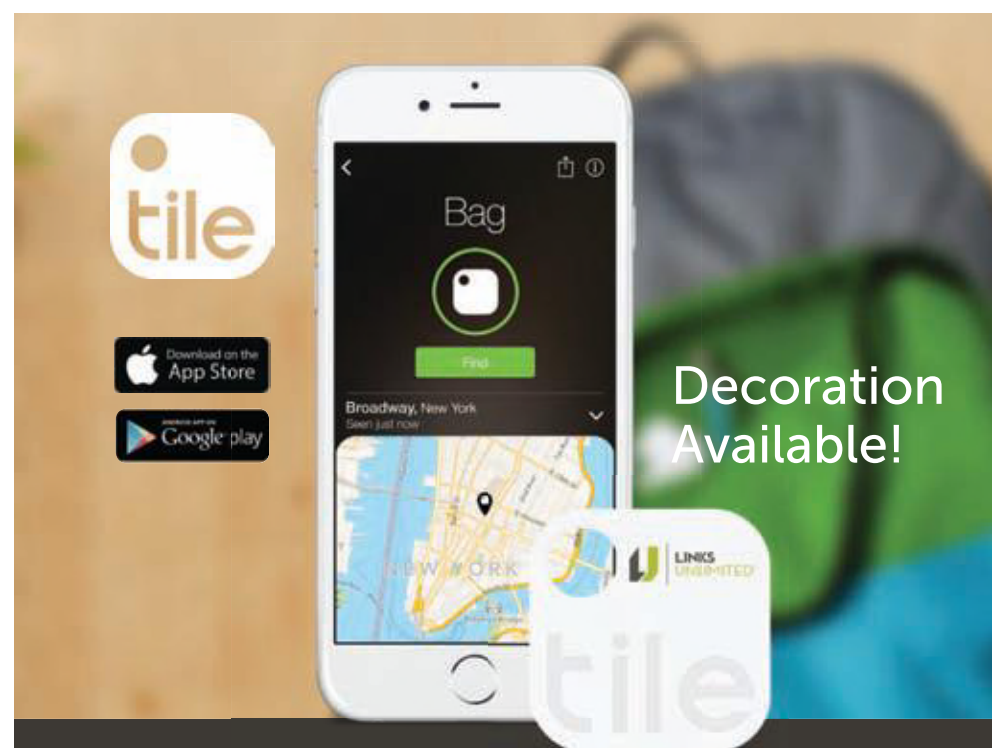
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value as well.”

Borst said that offering a gift card is a great option for providing, well, options. “It’s the same old argument that the gift card people have always used,” he said. “People prefer either going online or going into the store and looking and trying out what Under Armour and Puma and Nike and Adidas have and then picking the one that fits them the best. It’s the choice that makes it more of a reward than being stuck with an individual brand. What athletic shoes or apparel suits you best isn’t necessarily what fits the next person best, and it’s that choice that people want.”

This is especially true of apparel and athletic shoes, but it also applies to other rec and sporting goods. Giving people a range of options ensures they’ll be able to find something aspirational. **PIP**



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Consumers, Employees Seek Companies Dedicated to CSR

More companies today are taking part in corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a way to have a more positive impact on the community.

“Corporate social responsibility refers to initiatives and efforts undertaken by the corporation to either engage in new activities or self-regulate current activities that help the business make a larger impact or contribution to society as a whole,” said Melissa Van Dyke, president of The Incentive Research Foundation (IRF).

The IRF’s “2016 Trends in Incentive Travel, Rewards and Recognition” report stated that “CSR is a given, not a goal. Employees increasingly expect best-in-class organizations to be good corporate citizens. Incentive and recognition program planners are integrating CSR opportunities in the form of culture-building volunteer days or incentive travel teambuilding events. Millennials are demanding ‘social impact travel’ where fun and sun meets the ability to have a social impact.”

And to prove that more companies are committed to CSR, back in 2010, the Incentive Marketing Association (IMA) awarded its first ever Circle of Excellence Social Responsibility Award to Chicago-based Hinda Incentives. The Social Responsibility Award was a new addition to the Circle of Excellence Award Program.

“Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is part of a larger cultural shift in the way we think about corporations and the communities they affect—both inside and outside the organization. Increasingly, we expect businesses to act as good corporate citizens, providing products and services in a positive way, treating employees and customers well, and contributing to the greater good,” said Susan Adams, CPIM, CEP, senior director of engagement, Next Level Performance, a Dittman Company, New Brunswick, N.J.

“CSR initiatives have emerged as a way for corporations to include a positive effect on the community as integral to the business plan, and to communicate these efforts as part of their mis-

By Deborah L. Vence

nsible Business

sion to both internal and external stakeholders,” Adams said.

Why CSR Is Important

“From a global perspective,” according to Van Dyke, “the CSR movement is important because it means executives in businesses are giving deeper consideration to the environment, and people are aware their business has impact outside of just profit.”

From a business perspective, having a solid CSR strategy is an important part of modern business since more and more consumers and employees are demanding that the brands and organizations with which they align themselves have a bigger mission than solely profits.

“In essence,” Van Dyke added, “employees and consumers want to know not just what you produce, but why you exist.”

People want to do business with and work for organizations that share their values.

“When we contribute our time or money to a company, we participate in their success and reinforce their role in our community,” Adams said. “By instituting a CSR program, a company expresses its brand values in a public forum. It shares its success in a meaningful way.”

The fact is that CSR is what customers want. It builds brand loyalty, enhances reputation, increases sales and profits, attracts investors, attracts and motivates talent, and improves employee retention.

Dena Hirschberg, vice president of sales and marketing at Helping Hand Partners (HHP), a nonprofit corporation in Chicago that helps businesses source socially responsible products for their clients and customers, said CSR is a top driver of consumer behavior.

“Studies show how consumers will spend money [on products] made in a socially responsible way. They will switch brands to support a brand that is charitable and embraces a charitable cause,” Hirschberg said, adding that the consumer-driven trend is resonating especially with millennials.

“As you get younger and younger, it’s an exponentially greater

cause to them. They will actively seek out a socially acceptable component and embrace CSR.”

Consumers want products that are made in a socially responsible way; products that directly benefit a charitable organization or cause; and companies that engage in corporate social responsibility, according to HHP.

Smateria is an example of a company that is dedicated to CSR. The company offers a line of fashion and tech accessories and provides free preschool and daycare for the artisans’ children. The company makes what’s called the Endless Love Bowl, an 11-inch metal bowl made with recycled bicycle tire spokes. The bowl, which can be customized, is handmade by artisans in India.

Many major companies have taken the lead in CSR, including Google, Disney and Coca-Cola.

And, Hirschberg stressed that CSR can create a sea of change. “One person can make a ripple, but if all are doing it,” she said, “pretty soon it’s a whole wave.”

“Part of our job with various partners that we work with is that it’s not a one-sided deal,” Hirschberg said. “We are vested in mentoring them, helping them about sustainability, production dates, making sure we have inventory. We have gotten to the place where our partners are really good business people now.”

And, “As we bring on new partners and products that are popular for incentive programs, [we are] helping our partners become better businesses. It’s a joy for us, too,” she said.

She also noted that on the partner side, one of the challenges sometimes is getting that organization to become more consistent. “On the customer side, it’s a continuous educational process, helping them utilize CSR as a tool for them and as a great sales tool,” she added.

Incorporating CSR Components

Companies can incorporate CSR elements into their incentive pro-



The advertisement for Jamba features four different models of juicers and blenders arranged in a row. From left to right: a manual citrus squeezer with a glass of orange juice, a compact personal blender with fruit inside, a large cold-press juicer with a pitcher of juice, and a high-speed blender with fruit inside. The background is a vibrant green with the Jamba logo in white and red. Decorative swirls in red, orange, and green are on the right side. At the bottom, a green banner contains the contact information.

Contact: Steve Izykowski • steve.izykowski@hamiltonbeach.com • 610-485-9130

From a business perspective, having a solid CSR strategy is an important part of modern business since more and more consumers and employees are demanding that the brands and organizations with which they align themselves have a bigger mission than solely profits.

grams by considering a few factors.

“First, and most importantly, is to do a deep dive into understanding what your organization’s corporate social responsibility and social mission is. All activities should dovetail from there,” Van Dyke said.

“For example, if your company’s social mission radiates around environmentalism, focusing on production and paper or green products is a good start. On the other hand, if the organizational social mission focuses on social justice or scientific research efforts to develop initiatives, source products that support these efforts,” Van Dyke said.

Adams said that CSR initiatives now are frequently woven into incentive programs.

“Group incentive travel programs and recognition events provide the perfect opportunity for a CSR activity,” she said.

“As an example, guests on one of our recent travel programs participated in a team-building event to gather and deliver supplies for a group of schoolchildren in Mexico. Every one of the top performers of the company participated,” she said. “They provided an important service for the children, and the experience drove home the company values, one of which is ‘valuing people.’”

Sustainability initiatives are another way to incorporate CSR into all kinds of programs.

“Instituting ‘green’ practices on site at a travel program, for example, can include providing water stations and reusable glasses or bottles, instead of disposable plastics,” Adams said. “Communications can be electronic, reducing the impact made by printing. We have also incorporated using recycled products and even paper embedded with seeds when printing was unavoidable.”

On a recognition and incentive platform, CSR can take the form of charitable contributions that can be made using points.

Additionally, many organizations include CSR as an important part of employee engagement programs. While not always tied directly to recognition or incentives, such programs are intended instead to deepen the emotional commitment between the employee and the employer, as well as between the company and its community.

“Here, we are involved in many CSR activities throughout the year,” Adams said, “from our week-long HOPE Week that provides an opportunity for every member of our team to give back to our community, to weekly charitable donations by employees in exchange for a casual dress code.”

Similarly, Hirschberg noted that many companies are using a give-back program or direct charitable component, and added that a great way companies can communicate the fact that they embrace CSR is

by putting products in their catalog that support that stance.

“We are huge proponents of companies that have loyalty programs [that] source products ... from social enterprises,” she said, noting that companies can become environmentally conscious and get involved with local charities as well.

“That’s our goal ... really understanding that this is what consumers want and this is what employees want, too. It’s easy to create socially responsible products on your website or catalog. We are unique in that space as a supplier in those things,” she added.

How CSR Makes an Impact

The way in which CSR makes an impact is different for every organization.

“But, overall, the effort for business to be more conscious of its impact on people and the planet has huge dividends for all of us,” Van Dyke said.

Meanwhile, Adams said CSR is an all-around win.

“The outside community benefits from the resources and efforts of the organization. The company benefits from the good will and good reputation earned by doing the right thing,” she said.

“And, the employees benefit from working for a company they can be proud of, with values that align with their own, and where personal purpose and meaning intersect with their working lives,” she added.

Other ways CSR makes an impact involve consumer behavior. For instance, two out of three consumers would switch brands to support a good cause; six out of 10 have bought a product to support a cause regardless of price; 54 percent of consumers would be prepared to pay more for organic, environmentally friendly or fair trade products; and 86 percent of global consumers want companies to put society’s needs on the same level as their business needs, according to information from HHP.

In addition, research from companies that engage in CSR shows that they also experience lower employee turnover. For example, the standard annual rate of turnover for a retail food enterprise is roughly 200 percent; Starbucks’ annual rate of turnover is about 50 percent; the estimated cost to train each new Starbucks employee is \$1,000; and the estimated amount saved annually in employee training costs about \$65 million, according to information from HHP.

Moreover, CSR attracts and motivates talent. Top talent is more likely to: respond in a strong and positive way to CSR; feel enthusiastic about working for a company committed to CSR; and express high levels of dedication to company success.

Studies have shown, too, that in the new workforce, an overwhelming number of MBAs have sacrificed higher salaries to work at a socially responsible company, Hirschberg noted.

When you position yourself as a socially responsible company, you can do the following:

- Add value to your brand.
- Become an invaluable resource for your customers.
- Offer something meaningful both recipient and giver can feel good about.
- Send a message that resonates: “We care about the things you care about.”
- Create a more emotional and lasting connection.
- Boost your (and your customers’) brand.

How It’s Changed

CSR certainly has evolved over the past several years, but, “Initially, CSR was used as an add-on that, particularly during the downturn, was an additional way to cast initiatives in a positive light,” Van Dyke said. “Now it has become more of an integral part of business overall with organizations crafting and executing detailed social responsibility plans.”

Today, corporate social responsibility is expected by both con-

sumers and employees more and more.

“In an increasingly complex environment of global companies, wide gaps in economic conditions, and concerns for the environment, people look to the organizations they work for or buy from to be positive influencers,” Adams said.

In fact, 2014 research by The Nielsen Company revealed that consumers are even willing to pay more “for products and services provided by companies that are committed to positive social and environmental impact.” Through community-positive practices and CSR initiatives, a company can improve lives and improve business, Adams said.

The Nielsen report stated that 55 percent of global online consumers across 60 countries are willing to pay more for products and services provided by companies that are committed to positive social and environmental impact.

The propensity to buy socially responsible brands is strongest in Asia-Pacific (64 percent), Latin America (63 percent) and Middle East/Africa (63 percent). The numbers for North America and Europe are 42 and 40 percent, respectively.

In addition, data showed that some 52 percent of global respondents in Nielsen’s survey stated that their purchase decisions were partly dependent on the packaging—that they check the labeling first before buying to ensure that the brand is committed to positive social and environmental impact.

Hirschberg added that Michael Arkes, president and founder of

In an increasingly complex environment of global companies, wide gaps in economic conditions, and concerns for the environment, people look to the organizations they work for or buy from to be positive influencers.

Helping Hand Partners, was ahead of his time. “The first few years were about educating the concept of social responsibility,” she said. “Moving beyond ... the incentive world had to catch up to his vision and understand it.”

PIP

CSR in Action - IRF Event Incorporates CSR

Putting CSR into action, during check-in for the Incentive Research Foundation’s Annual Education & Incentive Invitational, attendees took time for a corporate social responsibility experience designed to give back to the local community by packing Comfort Care Hygiene Kits and donating dollhouses, a puppet theater, a doghouse and other pet care items to The Shade Tree in Las Vegas. The Shade Tree is a shelter for women, children and their pets.

The IRF worked with Impact 4 Good, a company that runs socially responsible team-building activities, to oversee their community service activity. Participants were invited to come to make a difference while checking into the annual event by taking time to pack 400 Comfort Care Hygiene Kits containing essentials such as soap, shampoo, toothbrushes, and assembling and organizing the other items, which were then donated to The Shade Tree. Participants also included handwritten messages of encouragement within the donated items.

Founded in 1990, The Shade Tree offers shelter and 24-hour services to Nevadan women and children and their pets. Services include a 364-bed shelter, with a kitchen, laundry, restrooms and showers, a Survivors (of violence) Service Center, Workforce Readiness Program, Life Skills Program, Mental Health Service Coordination, Housing Assistance and a pet sanctuary to allow women to leave their homes and not leave their pets behind.

Sydney Reyes, development coordinator at The Shade Tree, and other Shade Tree staff attended the program and thanked the group in person for their donations.

Marlene Richter, Shade Tree’s executive director, followed up, adding, “Every day, dozens of women and children quietly step into our small lobby seeking help. Your gifts will assist us in providing emergency shelter to women and children who find themselves without a safe place to live and access to food, clothing or other basic life essentials.”

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Employee Acknowledgement

Survey Shows Value of Workplace Recognition Programs

A recent employee recognition survey proved the value of workplace recognition programs.

In fact, nearly three-quarters of the 300 human resources professionals who were queried said they plan to expand their recognition programs over the next year. The survey was conducted by Michael C. Fina Recognition, a New York-based organization that helps companies around the globe deliver recognition, rewards and incentive programs, at the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) 2016 Annual Conference & Exposition in Washington, D.C.

“We see a lot more organizations diversifying their recognition offering with a mix of formal and informal techniques,” stated Cord Himelstein, vice president of marketing and communications for Michael C. Fina Recognition, in a press release. “Thanks to the technology that’s available to modern recognition programs, HR departments have more flexibility with design than ever before.”

He also said that “Tracking ROI data is crucial to program success. With so many analytics and reporting tools readily available, everyone should be using them to get the most out of their investment.”

For the survey, respondents were asked which recognition initiative has the biggest impact on employee engagement. In response, they cited:

1. Above and beyond performance awards (33 percent)
2. Service anniversary awards (20 percent)
3. Personal notes or e-cards (10 percent)

Budgets always are a factor, and companies increasingly are considering no- and low-cost recognition solutions such as e-cards or digital notes.

To boot, the majority (94 percent) of individuals surveyed indicated that they were either very interested, interested or somewhat interested in a no- or low-cost solution. Respondents also said they find low-cost solutions appealing because they encourage daily recognition among peers (35 percent), are easy to manage (22 percent) and help build company culture (18 percent).

In a blog post about the survey, Himelstein noted that “Previously, personal

notes and e-cards were most often used informally to balance out other formal initiatives. Now, as these programs become more prevalent, HR professionals are more willing to give these easily administered programs credit for keeping employees engaged and providing overall convenience, with a very low initial investment,” he said.

When addressing ROI measurement, more than one-third of survey respondents (39 percent) indicated that they evaluate recognition programs with employee surveys; while another one-third (35 percent) said they do not measure their employee recognition programs. The remaining HR professionals surveyed measure program success based on participation rates, customer surveys, employee turnover and productivity.

“The earlier organizations can start building a meaningful connection with an employee, the better,” Himelstein stated on the blog. “For decades the five-year mark was the benchmark to start a service award program, but younger workers thrive on instant feedback and a more social workplace. For two consecutive years, our SHRM survey respondents have been split 50/50 on whether or not they recognize employees during their first year of service.”

And, he expects that early recognition eventually will become a preferred outcome.

“Over the past few years, organizations have started to offer a comprehensive combination of formal and informal recognition,” he said. “Many employers, even if they do not offer formal recognition early on, will provide an introduction to their recognition program to show an additional company benefit.”

Respondents confirmed the importance of recognition programs, too, with the majority (51 percent) implementing at least three to five recognition initiatives.

Traditional service awards, Himelstein stated, were cited as being the most effective programs for one out of five respondents.

“A high-performing service anniversary program can increase employee loyalty, drive employee engagement and create a culture of positive feedback that improves overall performance,” he said. “Celebrating

milestones and rewarding individual achievements have typically been the most authentic and organic types of employee recognition. In fact, they are essential elements to any program and the backbone for all other recognition.”

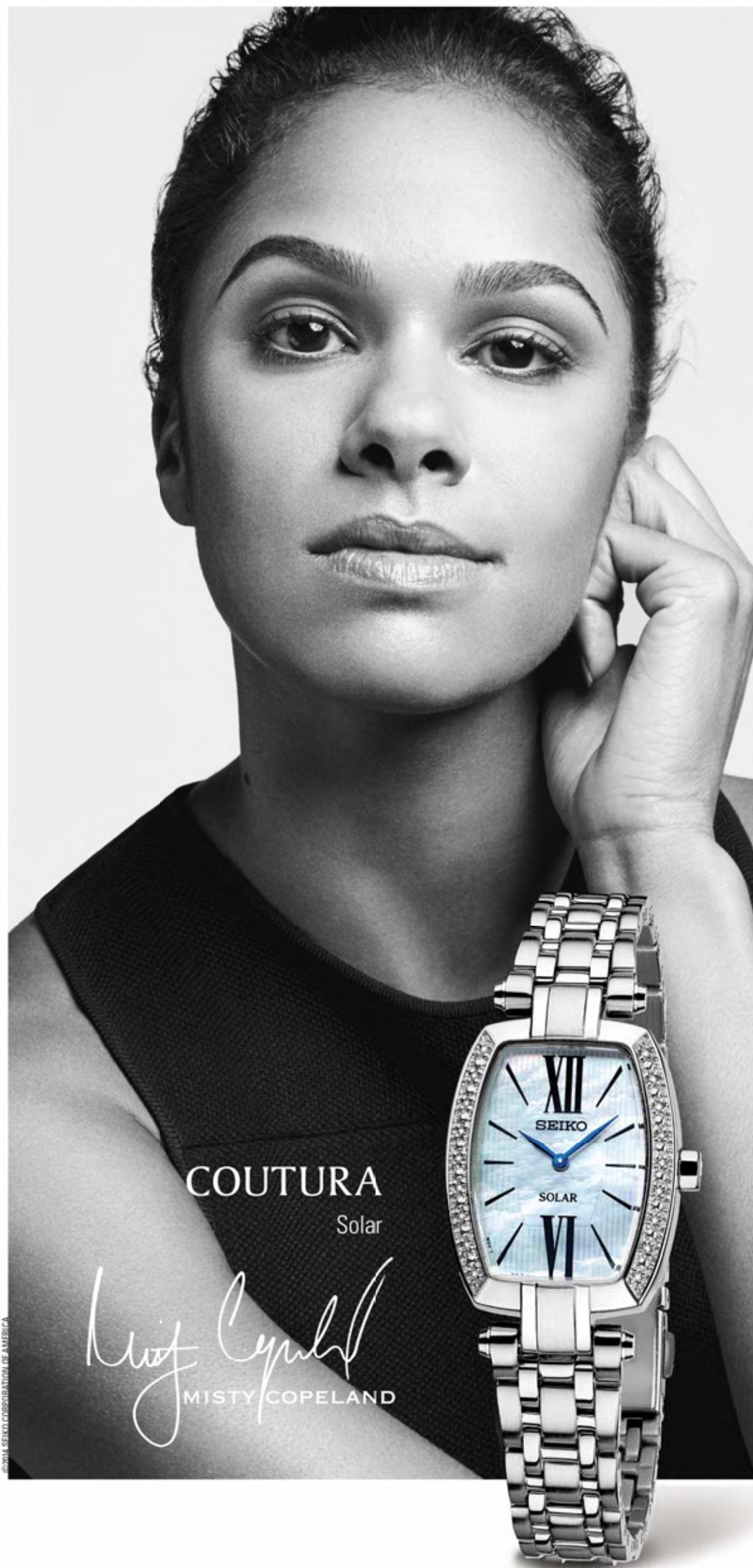
WorldatWork research, Himelstein noted, shows that currently 26 percent of organizations spend 1 to 2.9 percent of payroll on recognition programs—a 16 percent increase since the last time it was measured in 2013. The survey showed that 70 percent of respondents plan to make changes to their recognition programs in the next 12 months, an increase of 10 percent from last year.

For more information, visit www.mcfrecognition.com.

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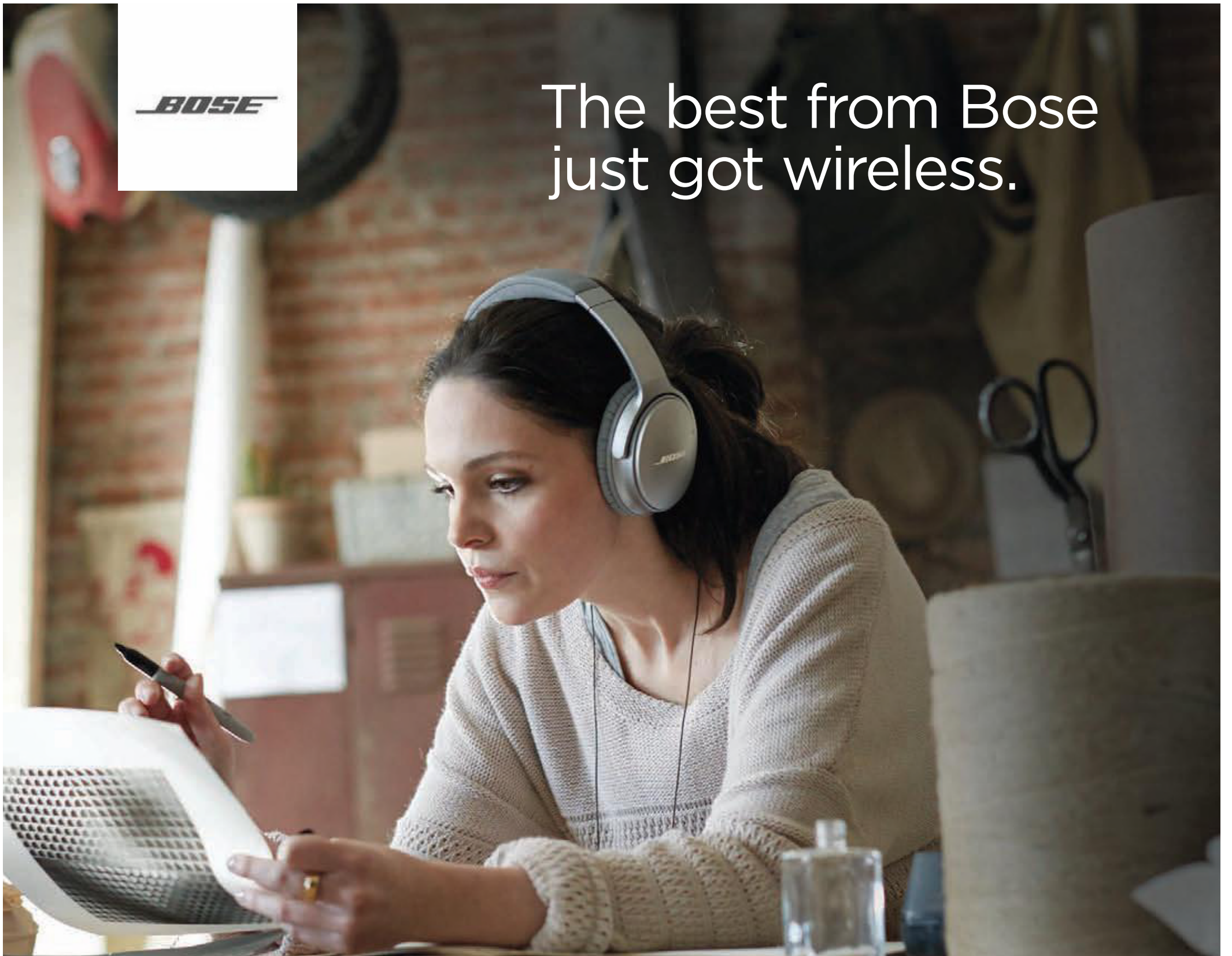
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