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Corporate Spotlight: Virtual Reality

Orca Communications Unlimited keeps its employees and customers happy by staying connected all the time

By Jeanie Casison-Tansiri

SEPTEMBER 01, 2005 - -- Phones ring off the hook. Messages pop up in e-mail in-boxes. Account executives stay busy brainstorming. At Orca Communications Unlimited, a public-relations firm in Phoenix, Ariz., the employees display an extremely high level of energy and enthusiasm for their work, staying on top of their game by securing valuable media placements for clients in USA Today, People, Time, The New York Times and spots on the Today Show, Good Morning America and CNN. This is an example of teamwork at its finest, especially since the 16 full-time staffers all work from home.

Remote Control

After more than 35 years in PR, Julia Hutton, founder and CEO of Orca Communications, wanted to do things differently. "I believed that people could live much more happily and be more productive if they worked from home. With computers, technology, cell phones and fax machines, it can be done very easily. Environmentally, it's better for the planet, and there's no commuting and arriving to work stressed out," Hutton says.

So in 2002, she started her own business, deciding on the company name after watching a documentary and learning that Orcas or "killer whales" have one of the most sophisticated communications systems in the animal kingdom. Since its first year, Orca Communications has experienced 1,200 percent growth in new business and continues to attract clients, many of whom comes from the referrals of existing clients, who represent a cross-section of industries, including hospitality, pet care, entertainment and nonprofit organizations.

At Orca Communications, distance doesn't divide employees but rather drives them to work closer and more efficiently together. Peer recognition is common, and motivation comes in the form of the "Hit of the Day" program, an e-mail announcement that shines the spotlight on significant accomplishments of individuals within the organization.

"We are not working in isolation. Recently somebody announced that they placed a story on the CBS Early Show. Everybody was really excited and thrilled about it. Online, people were chiming in saying things like 'Way to go,'" says Hutton. "The Hit of the Day helps everybody feel so much a part of each other's work and a part of Orca. Employees really strive to do well when they know the pats on the back are coming."

Orca Communications president Ann Noder agrees on the importance of practicing day-to-day recognition. "More than monetary compensation and awards, employees truly want to feel they are appreciated in their jobs. We are a virtual company, but we are really connected via e-mail, with constant recognition and management giving accolades. These practices encourage people to work hard, and they do want to do a good job," Noder says. "There is not that feeling nobody will notice [hard work]. When the whole company chimes in, it creates a better working environment, and employees feel that their work is meaningful."

Healthy work environments certainly promote productivity. Melanie Frankel, a senior account executive at Orca Communications, welcomes the change of energy at her new employer. "The morale is amazing here. My colleagues are very positive with one another. This wasn't always the case at my old job, where the negative was always emphasized," Frankel says. "When something went wrong, there was always screaming. At Orca, everything you hear is positive all day long. If something happens, it is presented as a learning experience on how someone can do the job better. They always reinforce the positive."

Fellow account executive Jenn Hoffman also appreciates her employer's approach to recognition. "I have never felt so supported by any other coworkers or boss. Whenever I have a new accomplishment, they are so quick to say 'great job' in an encouraging e-mail or cheerful phone call," Hoffman says.

Reconnecting with the Pod

While telecommuting may not be suitable for all organizations or individuals, it works brilliantly for Orca Communications, because Hutton makes sure that her employees communicate and meet regularly. The "pod," as Hutton affectionately refers to her team, reconnects in person once a month, and on an individual basis as needed. Orca employees also have a monthly "happy hour" social outing, where the only responsibility on the agenda is to have fun.

"There is a strong sense of community," Hutton says. "Even though everyone is working from home, we are working together via the Internet and over the phone. We also have a staff social every month, which one of the staff members designs. We go to different places around Phoenix just to laugh, talk and enjoy each other's company."

Hoffman adds, "Actually, I was surprised about the level of employee camaraderie. We are all in constant communication throughout the day helping each other, discussing strategies and even chatting about the ins and outs of working as a publicist."

Another successful employee initiative recently implemented by Orca is the Star of the Month program, a peer-to-peer recognition program that highlights stellar achievements. In addition to verbal praise and a certificate, Star of the Month honorees receive personalized awards, such as gift cards to their favorite stores.

In July, Frankel earned Star of the Month status for taking a new employee, Kirstin Sanders, under her wing and providing support. "Training is really important to the success of our company, and I try to call new employees to see if there are any problems that I can help address. When I worked in news, I always had a mentor. Being recognized as the Star of the Month is really nice, and it lets you know that you are appreciated."

Soon staffers will receive another surprise, as Hutton signed each of them up for the Whale Museum Orca Adoption program, an initiative that helps support the ongoing field studies of orcas and other marine animals, as well as educational and summer tourist programs in the Pacific Northwest. She thought of the idea after an inspiring whale-watching trip to the San Juan Islands of the coast of Washington State.

Despite being a virtual company, Orca manages to maintain a very tight-knit family. According to Noder, the strong employee loyalty stems from the organization's philosophy on work/life balance. "We find that most people want to be successful with work, but they have personal commitments, spouses, children, parents, friends and lives," she says. "We feel allowing a little flexibility and letting our employees work from home and set their schedules coincides with what we can do for our clients. By encouraging everyone to have personal lives and fulfillment, we have better employees."

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