

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

8/30/2016

Employee Feedback—It's a Gift

Abe VanWingerden



ABE VANWINGERDEN

For a few years now, we've been doing consumer surveys to find out what consumers think of our products and ideas on a quantitative basis. This has been invaluable information to help us make better decisions on items we present to consumers.

As the consumer continues to change in their buying habits, the old method of "show it around the office" didn't work anymore. We needed to get deeper insights into what consumers bought, why they bought it and how they used the item. We just couldn't continue to make big bets on items without relevant consumer insights/needs to drive those big bets so they were more successful.

We started our first formal focus groups in 2009-2010 when we hired an outside firm to recruit consumers who shopped at our retail outlets to get better insights. Focus groups help us figure out what questions to ask, but they don't give us the answers. We now have a 2,000-person Internet cross-section of people from various regions of the countries, various ages and demographics. This data is vital to quantifying the "size of the prize" of a new introduction to ensure we enter the market with a ton of confidence the item will be successful. A huge win and something that's more readily available in other industries, but just not in live goods.

However, this year, after three to four years of collecting data on the consumer, we realized we need to also take the same approach with our employees. The old method of counting on a few trusted employees to get the "pulse of the place" worked, but as the workplace and the workforce has changed rapidly over the last five years, we felt we were missing some new trends that might be developing.

I think we can all agree that outside of weather, labor is the one of the biggest single impacts on our business, and it's increasingly becoming more difficult today to find good seasonal and full-time labor. So first we did some research on our recruiting efforts and, secondly, we did our first company-wide survey as well to get a better gauge.

While there was a ton of data in our 20-question survey I will cover in future articles, we had three big

learnings:

1. Your best recruiters are your employees: In tracking incoming employees, we found over 60% of the employees wrote in “Word of Mouth” on how they heard about the company. That caused us to ask in our survey, “Would you recommend Metrolina as a good place to work?” to find out what employees are saying about the company. To our relief, 90% of employees (out of 600 respondents) said yes, they would recommend Metrolina as a good place to work. Because of this, we’re going to do more next year to use our current employees to help recruit others.
2. Importance of health care coverage: A lot different than in other years, but our employees gave providing free health care as the No. 1 benefit we offer (over bonuses, paid vacation and 401k plan). The general theme was that while there are other options out there than there were five years ago (i.e., ACA), our employees appreciate the ability to have a program they understand and is easy to participate in. It made us realize that if we’re going to enhance any benefit we offer, health care is a good place to start.
3. The desire to work with a family business: We’re a big company by industry standards, but the feedback we got from employees is that they love working here because they love working for a family business that cares about people. That came out over and over again in the survey. This is not to pat ourselves on the back, but more of a new awareness of how important it is for everybody in our small industry to not only treat folks like family, but also to use that as a recruiting tool. People genuinely want to be part of something bigger than just a job and they want to be where the ownership is engaged. That’s our industry in a nutshell—we have more family businesses than most any other industry and yet we’re not touting that in our recruiting efforts. Something to think about as you begin plans for spring 2017 labor needs.

This process has taught me that it’s vital that we take stock not just of ourselves, not just of our consumers, but also of our employees. We don’t exist without them, and the more we listen to them, the better off we will be.

GT

Abe VanWingerden spent eight years working for Procter & Gamble in Sales and Marketing and is now part owner and President of Sales/Marketing at Metrolina Greenhouses, Huntersville, North Carolina.