

Symbolic Recognition: The Art Behind Corporate Emotional Connection

Written by: Jay Donlin, VP Sales & Marketing, Visions Awards / Awardcraft

“Lest we forget.”

Sadly, it is a phrase we hear all too often today because of its association with a culture of war. From a positive perspective, however, its meaning is as resonant today as when the phrase originated in terms of honoring the battlefield achievements of soldiers with symbolic awards of everlasting recognition: the Bronze Star, the Purple Heart, or the Distinguished Service Cross.

Symbolic awards designed as an art form to create emotional connection—“esprit de corps.”

Sadly too, it is a phrase we don't hear enough of in today's corporate culture, and on the brand battlefield fronts, where company soldiers work tirelessly in their wars to form and win corporate customer emotional connection. For their achievements, “Lest we forget” is being replaced by the new phraseology of, “Here's a little token of remembrance.”

The art behind corporate emotional connection for the employee is becoming a lost art form, and in designing employee recognition programs, as in all design, award form should follow function

As we all know, money and jobs were plentiful during the 80s and 90s, leading companies to try anything to lure talented prospects. Corporations during this period spent a great deal of time, energy and financial resources in attracting top talent to their ranks; however, without strong programs of retention, these may have been wasted efforts. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 30% of employees feel any obligation to stay with a company. In the past, money and/or advancement were enough, but those days may be gone. Employees today need to feel a vital part of their company, recognized for achievement and making a difference in general.

Many of these same corporations may have forgotten about Abraham Maslow's theory; commonly know as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, in keeping these people within their ranks. At the top of the pyramid resides self-actualization that includes a person's need to feel satisfied with his or her performance and contribution in the workplace. There may have been a perception that symbolically acknowledging achievement was no longer meaningful in meeting a basic human need, or that it could be replaced with something of higher significance or relevance. Symbolic recognition, in many cases, has been replaced with lifestyle “choice” programs and awards, creating a disconnect with the recipient by not capturing the true essence of the achievement. While the corporation may think the employees “want” an iPod® or Weber® gas grill, what they “desire” is expressive appreciation for action. A balance between the “how and why” of recognition with the actual “what” they are receiving that creates bonding experience.

Trends also indicate that while a comprehensive recognition program may include a cross-section of incentives, rewards, awards and recognition...there is no one, single right solution. Rather, a combination of elements creates a stronger recognition culture for employees to embrace, with a reason behind everything and everything with a reason for being.

Revitalizing a lost art form.

Today, there is a paradigm shift back to a more meaningful approach to recognition strategy. Too often, company time-of-service award programs, performance achievement and incentives fail to make the emotional tie between the employee and the company and/or brand they represent. If the true intent of a service award program is to say how much you appreciate someone's dedication, hard work and team spirit, the most effective way to recognize these is by presenting a symbolic award that is representative, personal, tangible and worthy of the achievement, done in a meaningful way in front of their peers.

Recognition in all forms is positive for corporate culture and growth. Every recognition program promotes self-esteem and value—acknowledgment for a job well done. The important difference of symbolic recognition is that it should serve as a constant, lifelong reminder of the individual accomplishment. In many cases that individual accomplishment will motivate others to attain similar levels of achievement, thus creating a ripple effect throughout an organization's culture. Companies can utilize symbolic awards to help brand their recognition strategy by providing daily, visible, and tangible reinforcement that their company acknowledges the efforts of its most valuable asset: its people, bonding employee to corporation at a deeper level.

Symbolic awards – a material difference.

Symbolic awards are different today, even at the material level. While the traditional wood, bronze and acrylic material look is still relevant and useful, you will see contemporary, avant-garde works of art that incorporate sharp lines with intricate details using fossil stone, stainless steel, crystal glass, bronze, cast aluminum and many other material mediums.

One reason for this is to keep pace with the ever-changing face of corporate cultures everywhere, as well as the demographic shift toward meeting the needs of the tech-savvy, materially minded nature of today's younger workforce. What has deeper meaning to the retiring baby-boomer from a blue chip company may not have the same meaning to their sons and daughters beginning their own careers with a start-up headed on the path to a NASDAQ IPO.

This is just one aspect of the art of symbolic recognition.

Symbolic awards – a management difference.

Another aspect lies within the management difference. Just as with materials, there is art behind the management of symbolic recognition and awards. Much like the change in corporate cultures and workforce demographics have given rise to the need for materials changes, so too has it changed management style.

For symbolic recognition to be effective, it needs to be:

- ***Conceptually Universal—Supportive of a singular culture.***
With departmental, business unit or sales regions of start-up or mid-market companies in such a state of incredible growth, and yet divergent interests, the need is evident to promote unity wherever possible through corporate-driven programs, including symbolic recognition. There is value in bringing recognition under a universal "conceptual heading." While everyone is driving toward the same destination, they are not all at the same point in their journeys – thus the need for the next point.

- *Flexible—Allowing autonomy based on individual need, yet with global goals.*
The reality of maintaining flexibility and autonomy is important –especially as it pertains to global corporations. The concept of a single symbolic recognition structure may bring up issues of “fairness” and “consistency” if all the global regions are faced with competing in an “all-inclusive recognition environment.” As a result, try designing awards that are “regionally meaningful,” yet globally accepted.
- *Involving—Allowing for participation and sharing of successes.*
For the recognition effort to be successful, it needs to be inclusive. Involving other employees, and perhaps even family, will do much in making the symbolism more meaningful for everyone. Having an award presented by a respected and admired person within the company goes a long way in making the recipient feel his or her efforts were acknowledged, and that they are truly a part of a great organization. Make it as personal as possible. This is not the time to rely on impersonal presentation formats.
- *Intrinsically Of Value—Showing inherent value for level of investment.*
Any symbolic recognition effort undertaken needs to provide a return on investment, for both the individual and the corporation, showing strong value for the investment by all stakeholders.

If one truly looks at symbolic recognition as the art behind corporate emotional connection, it is easy to see that there is a distinct difference in its lifetime achievement value. Corporations benefit by return-on-investment in human capital. Individuals benefit by return-on-investment in time and talent. Everyone benefits by the creation of a stronger corporate culture based on mutual admiration, and brought to life in meaningful, three-dimensional, iconic form.

The ultimate point to symbolic employee recognition is...

Why give them something to remember, when you can give something they will never forget?