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Tech Talk: TV Network Rewards Staff Online

By Elizabeth Wasserman

A Maryland-based independent TV network for retirees finds that employees can help support the business mission better through an online employee engagement program.

Retirement Living Television (RLTV), an independent TV network for retirees based in Columbia, Md., launched three years ago with a staff of 50 made up of part technical workers and part creative workers. To get employee buy-in to RLTV's mission, CEO Brad Knight tells IncTechnology.com that the network invested in a Web-based software and services tool that transforms the way employees are recognized and rewarded.

Elizabeth Wasserman: Did your employees understand RLTV's mission?

Brad Knight: We're an emerging independent television network. There are people in the field that will tell you there's a two percent chance you could start a successful independent television network -- particularly in this economic environment. We also have this social mission to serve the retirement audience. That's an audience that's never been targeted before. If we were starting a children's network, we could look at what Nickelodeon is doing. But there is no model for what we're doing. We were also lean on staffing. We're not Viacom. When we go into Comcast and say, 'You really should be carrying us,' they say, 'Can you keep your signal up? How good is your programming?' I have to look like a full-blown television network with the budget of a startup.

I'm also running a network operation. I have a signal up on a satellite 24 hours a day, seven days a week. What happens is we have a very disciplined side consisting of technical operations, programming, network operations -- and that has to seamlessly integrate with the other side of the business, which is the creative side, involving producers. Trying to get the two sides to understand the mission and pull together is the secret to success at this startup.

Wasserman: What did you decide to do?

Knight: We started trying to have an integrated human resources effort from the beginning, when we started in 2006. Everybody goes through HR. We tried to find very competitive benefits, good procedures and policies on hiring and retention, and started with all the basic HR functions. We started to see that we have these two kinds of people on staff -- right brain people and the left brain people. We started to see a need for cross

communications between our departments. That's why we hired Brand Integrity, a brand strategy practi, and ended up with their Employee Engagement product co-developed by Potential Point. We wanted an employee recognition component to our business. I love to have contests at work – like 'let's name the TV show.' That way you bring everybody in on the discussion. They e-mail in names and we look for the winner. Everybody really loves that the engineer in the back corner might get to name the new TV show.

Wasserman: How does it work?

Knight: It's a place online where peers can recognize each other for impacting the business. I can log in and document, 'I was doing my job today and I noticed that Sally from programming was in doing something not related to her job and she helped us out.' You nominate that person for recognition. There are three different levels recognition that result in a point/dollar award -- one, two and three star awards. A one star might be Sally gives Tony a compliment and the one star might get a \$10 award. A three star might get a \$50 or \$100 award, and the story is shared with other employees to promote best practices. Employees then can redeem their award point to buy items on Amazon. The beauty of it is that the nominating person gets more points than the person being nominated. So that encourages everyone to go around plugging their buddy and it's ultimately self-serving. What happens is that people are pointing out other peoples' exceptional behaviors on a daily basis and RLTV employees are living the brand. In addition to the daily awards, we can run a campaign that helps focus employees on a specific goal. For example, we are running a campaign focused on reducing costs. Any employee who recognizes or is recognized for reducing costs, gets an extra boost to their award points.

Wasserman: What have the results been?

Knight: We've been using it for about 24 months now, with employees documenting more than 1,600 success stories. In the last eight weeks alone, 36 stories have been at a three star level, with results you can actually put your finger on. For example, the cost savings campaign that we ran in the summer/fall of last year led to tens of thousands of dollars in projected savings. The captured ideas ranged from a simple, 'I noticed so-and-so doing two-sided printing now. I think everyone should do two-sided printing,' to putting automatic dimmer switches on the lights to save electricity. It could also be that while we were at Comcast the other day, Betsy, who runs affiliate sales did a spectacular job reinforcing behaviors that support our brand.