

2020

INCENTIVE PROGRAM DESIGN FOR CRISIS RECOVERY



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Incentive Program Design for Crisis Recovery

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck in early 2020, incentives professionals were challenged to develop new strategies to keep their people and teams motivated. As the industry takes measures to recover from the pandemic, many businesses have new goals.

Best practices and principles in effective employee incentive program design are critical components of motivating and rewarding a workforce that may be fundamentally changed by pandemic.

Each of the articles in this report is informed by IRF, other related research, and the insights of nineteen industry professionals whose perspectives range from incentive program design and program ownership, to corporate executives who use incentive programs to motivate their employees.

- 1. *Timeless Principles of Effective Program Design***
provides an overview of the core building blocks strategic incentive program.
- 2. *Seven Critical Questions***
outlines how to establish program objective, determine what goals or behaviors will be rewarded, and select the types of rewards.
- 3. *Eight Proven Practices***
offers practical advice from industry experts about elements that have consistently made their incentive programs effective.

Crises like COVID-19 influence the manner, emphasis, and degree to which the principles and practices of effective reward program design should be applied. Thus, each of the articles offers insight into how organizations might adapt and use incentives and rewards to address the immediate challenges presented by the pandemic and how incentives can accelerate recovery.

The Timeless Principles of Effective Employee Incentive, Reward and Recognition Programs

Introduction

In the 1800s, officers of the British East India Company grew alarmed at the number of cobra bites its employees were suffering in and around New Delhi, so they decided to offer a bounty on cobras delivered to their barracks. At first, the incentives worked – snake bites decreased. But not for long. Even though more and more dead snakes were being exchanged for reward, snake bites remained a problem. Wise Indians had discovered that raising cobras then exchanging them for the bounty was easier, safer and more profitable than hunting them in the streets of Delhi. When the officers realized this, they angrily cancelled the program. Having no reason to farm snakes any longer, the Indians released them making the problem worse than before the incentive program began.

Though most likely fictional, this cautionary tale illustrates the difficulties in designing effective incentive programs. Incentive program design requires much thought and planning, since incentives target the most complex systems known – human psychology and motivation. Moreover, as the story illustrates, and the axiom goes: “you get what you incentivize.”

Countless organizations before and since the British East India Company have learned this lesson the hard way. Most recently, Marsh Insurance and Wells Fargo, for example, paid more than a billion dollars in fines and reparations for the damages caused by their ill-conceived employee incentive programs, each of which led to harmful unintended consequences.¹

The incentive program designer must think systematically – like a policy or law maker – considering at once what is most likely to inspire and motivate employees and partners, while also imagining and addressing the myriad ways a program might go wrong and even generate unintended consequences. When designed properly, incentive programs engage the workforce to higher performance and outcomes. They deliver impressive returns on investment and can even transform organizations. No wonder then that about 84% of US firms use non-cash incentives to motivate employees², and at least 90 percent use some form of bonus on top of regular compensation.³ Some, however, do so more effectively than others.

The incentive program design elements and principles below offer a high-level description of what every program designer and owner should consider in developing, delivering, measuring and improving their programs. Where relevant, these principles are described in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. In sum, the use of incentives and rewards can contribute significantly to organization’s recovery from the impact of the pandemic.

The Principles of Effective Employee Incentive Programs

Effective incentive program design and delivery varies depending on goals, participants and circumstance – vital principles do not vary, even in the midst of a crisis.

Think Strategically

Employee incentives and rewards have enormous power beyond the extra effort they inspire. By aligning incentive program objectives to corporate strategy and priorities, programs can contribute to the achievement of the firm’s most important strategic goals by focusing employees on what is most important. Near-term strategic goals determined before the pandemic probably need adjustment in most firms as will the individual and team incentives linked to them. Incentives and rewards should be used to accelerate change directed at new priorities and to signal to employees what’s vital in the “new normal.”

Organizations should take the time to step back and assess the situation they face owing to the pandemic. Leaders should determine and communicate new strategy, goals and directions. Incentive program designers and owners should then adjust existing incentive programs or design new ones accordingly so that they remain realistic. Given the general volatility and uncertainty of business today – crisis or not – designers should develop incentive and reward programs that are as agile and adaptable as any other critical corporate program.



“Considering the economic impact of COVID-19 on their balance sheets, organizations should take another look at their goals and targets and re-calibrate them.”

Stephen Cook, Lorandus

When designers develop incentive programs strategically, they should also take into consideration longer-term corporate objectives, including culture change. Incentives signal to employees not only key outcomes such as revenue targets, but the behaviors that are most important to senior leaders. In the current environment, employers might aim to promote safety and wellness programs, for example. They might relax any revenue and profit goals that have become unrealistic and emphasize behaviors that will reestablish trust, such as collaboration and inclusion. New incentives around education might be important, such as salespeople learning how to operate in a remote sales environment. Employees might be recognized for identifying ways to cut costs, retain clients or find new customers.

For most firms, these times require creativity, innovation, continuous learning and experimentation. Strategic use of incentives can accelerate such behaviors and actions across the entire workforce. Reward programs must also avoid creating a transactional mindset, where employees come expect that every effort must result in extra reward. To do this, designers emphasize the emotion and feelings that accompany rewards. Here, well-selected and presented non-cash rewards generate loyalty by strengthening relationships between employees and the firm, between each other, and with customers and other stakeholders. Preserving and restoring these relationships will be a key component of many firms' pandemic recovery plans.

Communicate

Logically, no incentive program can succeed unless the intended audience knows about it. Good incentive program design requires a communications plan, yet firms too often underfund communications. In addressing COVID-19, communications grow even more vital as a means of signaling revised corporate goals and priorities, and in preparing employees for the possibility that incentive programs may have to change again depending on the duration and depth of the crisis.

Start by announcing the new or revised incentive program and its overall objective(s), including, if applicable, the overarching goal of recovering from the pandemic crisis. No matter the circumstances, a common goal gives all participants something to rally around. Initial communications should aim both to inform and promote. Design simple messages that generate "buzz" for the program; include graphical emails, videos and print. Provide a clear and concise description of the rules, the rewards available and exactly what participants need to do to earn them. Throughout the program share collective progress toward the overarching goal and regularly communicate participant progress (individual and team) toward specific goals – publicly if it is a contest, privately otherwise.

“The importance of simplicity emerged from IRF’s Top Performer Studies. Attention spans have continued to shrink, so simplifying incentive rules and incentive communications are more important than ever.”

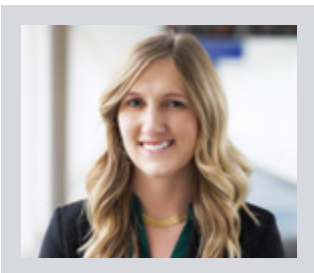


Mike May, *Brightspot Incentives & Events*

Use these communications to offer ideas and insights that help participants boost their performance, move closer to their goals and rally the workforce around the shared corporate mission. When the program ends, conduct a reward and recognition ceremony (virtual or otherwise) where participants receive their rewards in front of the team or firm. As the crisis subsides, change, adapt and communicate your programs again.

Measure for ROI and Continuous Improvement

The most effective incentive programs are informed by data and advanced analytics. Experienced program designers should leverage their knowledge and instincts but must also consult hard evidence. Data analytics can identify gaps in organizational performance that incentives might address. It can reveal what outcomes and behaviors programs should target and what motivates participants at an individual level.

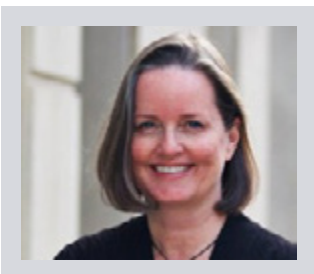


“Data uncovers what behavior is most important, who acts on that behavior and what the opportunity is to grow. But more than just data analysis, now effective program design requires predictive analytics – using all the information to know what likely will happen after deploying a program and what and how to adjust to optimize the investment.”

Dawn Schillinger, *Maritz Motivation*

Making sense of Big Data requires the use of analytical tools. Data can reveal patterns and opportunities in real time, and it can predict the elements of program design that will generate the best results. Designers should work with analysts to identify data that might yield valuable insights into future program improvements or inform initiatives in other parts of the firm.

Designers should also use data and devise metrics that gauge the value of their programs. Incentive programs – particularly those using non-cash rewards – can deliver tremendous return-on-investment.⁴ As leaders demand more evidence of returns to support budget requests, designers who have mastered tools such as the ROI Methodology⁵ and the Master Measurement Model⁶ to evaluate their programs will be well-positioned.



“Businesses are constantly faced with new obstacles and must adapt. It is essential to be ready to adapt incentive programs and their goals, as well.”

Susan Adams, *Next Level Performance*

Seven Critical Questions in Employee Incentive Program Design

In times of turmoil and uncertainty, a leader's instincts may tell them to suspend incentives, rewards, bonuses, raises and other discretionary spending to preserve cash and even jobs. Designing new incentive programs or even continuing existing ones might feel like an avoidable expense in tough times. Leaders should remember, however, that these tools are among their most potent instruments to help accelerate recovery by focusing employees on priorities, shaping their behaviors, increasing their engagement and building trust.

The Seven Critical Questions

Organizations must ask questions up front to determine the type of incentive program they should use to address any given challenge or opportunity. The following questions require answers no matter the goals or behaviors you aim to encourage, and regardless of the situation – crisis or not.

1. **What Are Your Goals and Objectives?**

Before you do anything else, think about what you are trying to achieve: goals, objectives or solutions to problems or opportunities. Articulate these goals clearly with specific measures wherever possible. Gain executive support by making sure they align with corporate strategy, priorities and the expectations of senior leaders.

2. **Is an Employee Incentive Program the Right Solution?**

Knowing your objectives, determine the best solution or intervention. If sales have fallen off, you might aim to reverse the slide. Investigate the root causes of the performance issue. For many of the reasons described above, it may be that motivation has slipped and a sales contest might provide the needed spark. However, if your salespeople are used to face-to-face sales and are struggling to adjust to new methods, training in technology and remote sales strategies might better address the problem.

“Employees and customers feel adrift, businesses can't use their usual instruments to navigate, and every solution does NOT include an incentive.”



Jeff Broudy, *United Incentives*

3. Goal and Performance or Behavior-Based Incentives?

If you have determined that an incentive program is the best solution, think next about what you aim to incentivize, your goals and objectives. In the example above, you might offer rewards for attracting new customers no matter how large or small. Or you might reward managers who meet engagement and retention targets for their teams. Alternatively, you might wish to encourage behaviors that lead to more sales or greater employee engagement, like learning new remote sales techniques, placing more calls, writing more proposals or making more presentations. For managers, you might reward those who invest time in listening and coaching to boost engagement. You might also combine both types of objectives into one program. For existing programs, targets and longer-term goals may need to be adjusted downward and toward the short-term given the disruption caused by the pandemic.

4. Individual or Team Rewards?

Increasingly, top performing organizations recognize that incentives and rewards should extend beyond salespeople, managers and executives. Ideally, everyone in the organization should be eligible. The potential lift from your “middle 80%” all driving incremental results versus the gain your top 10% can achieve may be significant. In most cases, firms should design a range of individual and team-based incentives, recognizing that very little is achieved in modern organizations through solo effort. Moreover, customer buying patterns have changed; the majority now research prospective solutions and vendors on the internet before ever speaking with a salesperson.¹

Especially now as you strive to rebuild trust and engagement, extend rewards and recognition to as much of the workforce as possible. For example, consider marketing and customer service professionals and the various support people who contribute to a salesperson’s success. Think about incentives that encourage high-performance behaviors and winning cultures such as collaboration and knowledge-sharing versus others that motivate individuals to go the extra mile. You need both.

5. Tangible or Intangible Reward?

Next, decide whether you will offer tangible rewards (e.g., gift cards, travel, merchandise, promotion, cash), recognition only (intangible rewards), or a mix of both. This depends on your objectives and the scope of achievement sought. In many cases, sincere and specific recognition of performance will suffice, and especially where workers are remote, the more the better. This might include public recognition in front of the team and/or at recognition ceremonies involving the whole organization. These events can be staged virtually and still deliver impact. Formal recognition might include notes on employees’ files and – especially now – in technology platforms that capture peer and supervisor/manager recognition no matter whether the workforce is on site or remote.

In many cases, the scope of the goal or behavior you wish to incentivize, and the level of effort required, merit tangible rewards along with recognition. Make the size or value of the incentive commensurate with the goal and effort. If the firm is struggling financially, lower the value of rewards but try to recognize people more frequently. Whatever type or types of reward you use, under promise and over deliver. Don’t exaggerate the value of your rewards and don’t underestimate the power of sincere appreciation, whether in person or virtually.

6. Custom or Generic Rewards?

Remember that everyone is different and that employee circumstances are fluid. No one type of reward optimally motivates all people. Even when you think you know what most motivates an individual, they or their life circumstances may change as is starkly evident in the current crisis.

While the effectiveness of the reward depends in great part on its customization to the individual, you must also consider practicalities. Team rewards, for example, do not lend themselves to individual customization. Group travel rewards – when they return – should provide wide choice in activities, but can offer only one location, and in most cases, one venue. Make an effort to know your employees well and appeal to them as individuals, then consider the degree to which you can offer a wide range of choice in rewards while keeping the incentive program meaningful and targeted. Avoid complexity but let people choose the incentive or reward that most motivates them, at least to the extent possible.

7. Cash or Non-Cash Reward?

When simply asked to choose, many people will say they prefer cash rewards. Experiments and research that delve a little deeper, however, reveal that most people actually prefer well-selected non-cash rewards.² Most importantly perhaps, the preponderance of evidence demonstrates that, on average, non-cash rewards drive higher effort and performance than cash rewards and lead to better business outcomes.³ Nonetheless, in some circumstances, cash is the most appropriate reward. This may be especially true as firms recover from the pandemic, at least for employees who may need cash more than ever.

The emotional value of a non-cash reward, however, can greatly exceed its cash value provided it is well-selected and delivered. Non-cash rewards are both more memorable and drive long-term affinity. Try to find non-cash rewards that participants would not likely buy for themselves – ideally something they could not purchase as an individual. In normal times, unique travel and other experiential rewards pack tremendous emotional punch, but the pandemic has restricted these types of rewards. If experiential and travel rewards are temporarily impractical, substitute thoughtful merchandise and gift cards, delivered in exciting and memorable ways.

“If it’s a gift card, make sure it can be used for a wide variety of purposes. If it’s merchandise, give the recipient a choice. If it’s incentive travel, design experiences within experiences from which people can choose according to their own preferences.”



Rick Garlick, *Incentive Research Foundation*

Crisis times may also temporarily favor useful rewards over aspirational (i.e., luxury) ones. In normal times, try to strike a balance between reward types and offer choice. Unique non-cash rewards of all types generate buzz because, unlike cash, people talk about them – they have trophy value. The more impact a reward has on a recipient, the greater the recipient’s psychological desire to repay the kindness through greater loyalty and effort at work.⁴

Non-cash rewards are also less likely to create expectations among employees. Cash rewards tend to blend into compensation in the minds of employees. If removed, this can cause resentment and disengagement. Psychologically, non-cash rewards are less likely to have the same effect.⁵

Finally, non-cash reward programs provide designers latitude to mix up the rewards and the communications surrounding them. It is one thing to design brochures and web pages featuring unique luxury items and experiences; quite another to promote a pile of cash or a direct deposit.

Eight Proven Practices in Employee Incentive Program Design

Across most industries, firms have had to take dramatic cost-cutting measures, including laying off or furloughing employees, cutting back hours and requiring employees to work remotely. In essential services and even in industries that have thrived during the pandemic, employees faced new challenges, such as working under difficult, sometimes dangerous conditions, being asked to work faster and accepting longer hours. The result has often been damaged trust in the firm.

“Employees who have been fortunate enough to retain their positions are working harder than ever for the same, or even less pay. A company that does not recognize and show that they value their employees right now faces the consequences when the economy swings back to some sort of normal growth.”



Sandi Daniel, *FIRE Light Group*

For affected employees, the changes wrought by COVID-19 have likely eroded relationships with the organization, team members and customers. Some have experienced psychological damage through social isolation. Many experienced or stress and burnout due to adverse work conditions or by having to manage family demands while working from home. For employees returning to offices, social distancing, masks and fear of contracting the virus will only add to the stresses of work. These weakened relationships can reduce the meaningfulness of work and erode feelings of job security.¹ Stressed, isolated and scared workers rarely perform at their best, even when they want to.²

“The most effective programs I have seen in the last 30 years have three things in common: clear and compelling goals, a detailed implementation plan to show people how to succeed and an inspiring rewards selection designed to engage participants.”



Mike Donnelly, *Hinda Incentives*

This current threat of employee disengagement makes the role of incentives more vital than ever.³ By following the practices described below, organizations can design or revise incentive programs to drive the behaviors and actions needed to cope with and recover from the crisis – programs that more than pay for themselves. Successful incentive programs include attention to numerous details, each of which affects the others, requiring balance between them. These practices, with minor modification, apply during times of crisis and otherwise.

1. Develop Measurable and Realistic Program Objectives

Participants must easily grasp and understand how your program works, what it offers, what is in it for them and precisely what they have to achieve or do to earn a reward. If anything, amplify this message during pandemic recovery because employees face even more uncertainty than normal, and stability in their reward program will prove a welcome relief. In the same vein, avoid vague goals. For example, do not ask employees to “improve customer satisfaction” or “improve customer retention rate.” Instead, provide achievable and measurable goals, such as “improve customer retention rate from 76% to 84% within twelve months.”

Also establish and communicate clear reward eligibility criteria and rules. Use stretch goals, but don’t make them overly aggressive. Make sure that your goals are within participants’ control. Would-be participants will immediately assess their chances of earning a reward. If they deem the goals unachievable or outside their control, they’ll disengage. Limit your objectives so that your programs remain simple and easily understood.

2. Specify the Program Period

Determine specific start and end dates for your incentive programs. In sales, for example, decide whether a short-term contest fits your objectives versus a longer-term campaign (i.e., an ongoing incentive program). If you need to hit a revenue target in a specific quarter, a short-duration contest is more appropriate than a lengthy campaign. However, if you aim to change a range of salesperson behaviors, choose a longer-term campaign because behavior change normally requires more time and reinforcement.

The pandemic has disrupted business for many months so you may need to shorten performance periods and adjust longer-term programs. By specifying the duration of a program, you remove ambiguity around what counts toward earning a reward and what does not. Finite periods also avoid boredom and complacency with programs. They give you a chance to make changes and improvements, then promote a renewed and revitalized program.



“More than ever, revenue targets and other business objectives are achieved through teamwork, not just the extra work of salespeople in ‘hunter’ roles.”

Ira Ozer, Engagement partners

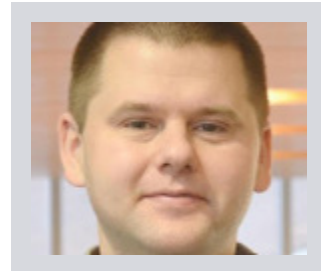
3. Carefully Select Participants and Aim High

Know who your program must target to achieve the outcomes you desire. In some cases, precise objectives might be achievable by only a small part of your workforce. You might encourage recruiters, for example, to increase the number and range of diverse candidates, but even in this case, you may need to reward those who advertise the firm's positions, applicant screeners and others in the talent supply chain.

If you seek the broadest and greatest performance gains, target the bulk of your employees who reside in your middle performance categories. Do not design a program that is achievable only by top performers as you will see greater progress with everyone putting in extra effort. In general – and especially in coping with the crisis – err on the side of inclusivity where possible. Especially now, utilize a combination of performance-based or milestone rewards for growth or behavior change.

Consider status-based or social rewards that do not cost a lot, but let managers recognize people frequently for doing the right thing. Reward people for meeting their goals as well as exceeding them. Offer tiers of reward depending on level of achievement in order to engage the most participants possible. In normal circumstances, link reward budgets to increased revenues or profits so that you do not have to place artificial caps on participants and reward earners. In today's environment, relax these practices slightly, if possible.

“The standard used to define good performance should not be too easy such that rewards do not motivate or too difficult such that few get rewarded and recognized.”



Adam Presslee, *University of Waterloo*

4. Approach Your Participants With Empathy

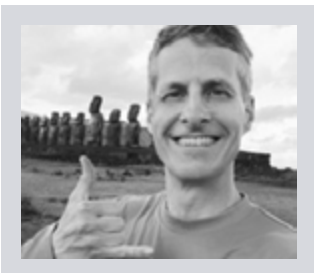
As strategists and designers, we must deeply understand the people targeted by our programs – their values, expectations, attitudes, and unique drivers of motivation. Company KPI typically require incremental effort from an audience in order to achieve a financial return, so ask yourself, “what would it take for me to want to put forth that extra effort?” Surveys, focus groups, and interviews are just a few tools companies can use to supplement their existing data (HRIS, Performance Reviews, Sales, LMS, etc.) with empathetic findings (understanding a person's feelings and priorities unique to their situation) to create high-fidelity segmentation models. These segments, often summarized as personas, should be used to inform aspects of program design including rules structures, communications/ personalization, reward selections, and reporting.

5. Consider Whether and How Sales Incentive Programs Should Be Treated Separately

Are outside and inside sales different enough in your organization to merit separate reward programs? Should you separate your sales incentive programs from those designed for the organization’s employees in general? This may depend on how your salespeople are compensated. Where sales compensation is highly variable based on performance, you may require separate sales incentives programs, even where non-cash rewards are offered. Consider too whether a sales incentive program should include the people who directly support the sales effort – normally, it should.

6. Leverage Technology

The range of current incentive and reward program technology is far too extensive to describe in full. From incentive program and engagement platforms to peer recognition systems, and from events technology to artificial intelligence and data analytics tools, IT use is exploding in the incentives field just as it is in nearly every other industry. As more employees work remotely in response to the pandemic, engagement and recognition platforms and technologies that automate the selection and delivery of rewards are even more important. While technology may not replace face-to-face interaction, firms whose employees can recognize and even reward each other remotely, via a peer recognition platform, for example, enjoy a distinct advantage now in keeping employees connected and engaged. Whatever the environment, most organizations require strategic use of the latest technologies to operate efficient and effective incentive programs.



“Technology is our friend in developing the correct, best rules structure, analyzing past history, and trends, developing models, and understanding your audience’s preferences. It does wonders for an incentive program.”

Scott Siewert, *Fab at Incentives*

7. Now, Determine Your Budget

In the current crisis, you may be forced to work within whatever budget your firm can allocate. Under normal circumstances, make the case for your budget only after you have carefully considered the design of the incentive program against the objectives you hope it will achieve. This allows you to advocate for what you need to be successful rather than do your best with what you are given.

Remember, even intangible recognition programs may incur costs if events and/or certificates are planned. For programs that include tangible rewards, build leadership support by forecasting your expected return on investment or return on value and by including those forecasts in a concise business case. Reward programs are often funded, in effect, through the greater revenues and profits that come with improved performance. In these cases – where an open-ended budget is used – there may be no limit on how many people can qualify for rewards (a very good thing) but you must still forecast in order to plan ahead.

8. Measure Performance and Report Results

Determine clear benchmarks for program success that are consistent with the goals and objectives set out for your program. Choose three to five meaningful metrics that accurately reflect progress against the most important aspects of your incentive programs. These might include participation rates and engagement in the program as well as metrics that track toward numeric goals such as sales, revenues, new customers, customer retention or otherwise.

If your program is aimed at behavior change, devise, track and report on metrics that gauge progress in those areas. For example, if you aim to encourage more cross-divisional collaboration and knowledge-sharing, consider using organizational network analysis to track the quantity and strength of connections between your divisions as the program progresses. Use tools such as the Master Measurement Model⁴ and the ROI Methodology⁵ to assess the impact of your program during and at its conclusion.

“Measuring not just outcomes, but also behaviors, is the key to building programs that aren’t ‘one size fits all,’ that reward more than just top performers for appropriate achievements and behaviors.”



Jerry Klein, Animate Growth Partners

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