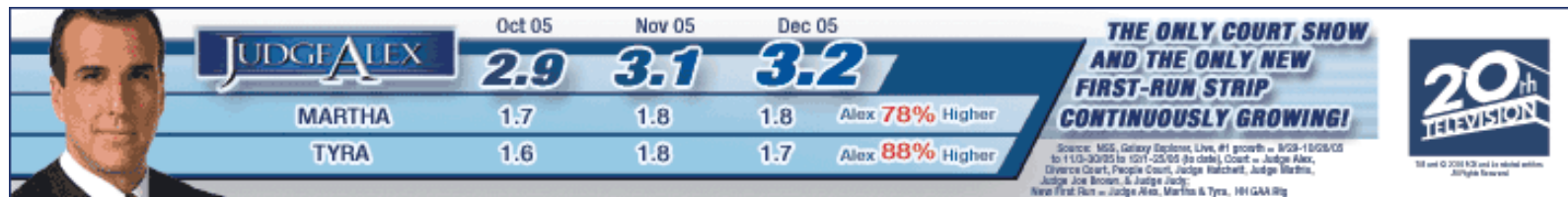




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## Use Creative Tactics to Retain Staff

**Management Rewards Such as Outings, Time Off, Group Activities Can Revitalize Hard-Working Employees**

By Mark Dominiak

Special to *TelevisionWeek*

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It's not uncommon at the beginning of the year for organizations to face the prospect that some of their employees who, having had enough of their current job, decide they're going to make a change.

Given that the new year often provides new fiscal budgets, many competing organizations enter the marketplace hoping to snatch up quality talent.

With those two circumstances in play, the question of who has given two weeks' notice becomes a popular topic at many water coolers during the first quarter of the year.

Media planning organizations are no different from other businesses in having to face turnover at the beginning of the year. There are some basic tactics media organizations can employ to try to keep employees happy, minimizing potential turnover problems. Most of these tactics require some kind of resource investment, whether it's flat-out cash or time spent not physically at work.

## Basic Tactics

While some organizations like to keep a tight rein on things like vacation days, many will give managers the option to offer hard-working employees an occasional sanity day. An informal break from the daily grind, especially during periods of high stress, goes a long way with employees.

It's a powerful tactic, but one that should be used conservatively. If a manager gets too liberal in handing out time off, the staff starts to feel entitled, undercutting the reward's value. If you're a manager and you think this tactic might be worthwhile, the best first step is to check company policy to make sure it's also accepted by management.

If your group hasn't already instituted an end-of-week cocktail hour, perhaps you should. At the end of the day next Friday, knock off an hour early. Whether people opt for a cold brew or iced tea, get your group together for camaraderie and let voicemail take over. Prompt as much nonwork conversation as you can, encouraging people to tell as many stories as possible. It's sure to help bring your group closer together.

Or think about taking a long lunch hour to go see a movie as a group. It's a low-cost way to give the group a break from the grind. A movie break also has the benefit of cleaning the slate. Remember that old anecdote about movies? That the world always seems different when you leave the theater? Not only do minds return to their desks a little fresher for problem-solving, but the desk they return to tends not to look as foreboding as it might have before the break.

## Special Tactics

Media organizations have some advantages that simply are not available to other kinds of businesses. These useful assets not only combat turnover potential but also reduce employee stress, entertain, educate, motivate and build *esprit de corps*.

For example, media organizations' attachment to ad agencies opens up the possibility of doing things like going on shoots or tagging along to watch or help conduct account-planning research. If you can navigate your people into some of these activities, they'll not only be better trained for the experience but will also appreciate the opportunity.

Think about screening upcoming programs as a group during summer months. It's likely your affiliated buying unit will have received new show pilots from the networks. Take a few lunch hours in a conference room to screen them with the group or make the pilots available for people to sign out and watch on their own.

Another relevant activity is to marshal the group to view programs or dayparts during work hours. Organize the activity around the target market of the brand assignment. If the target is a homemaker, for example, perhaps set up a weekly lunch hour or afternoon daytime soap break. Erica Kane and the "All My Children" crew conveniently air during the lunch hour. Or create a list of cable networks with positive skews to brand behavior and take a few hours a week for a month or two and tune in to the net's programming to see what it's all about.

Partnerships with media vendors are another asset that can be leveraged. If you can't give members of your team a monetary bonus, tickets to sporting events, late-night shows, theme parks and other events can be satisfying perks.

Vendors are also amenable to things such as allowing field trips. Once again, team members are generally receptive to an opportunity to do something interesting away from their desks. They also appreciate the opportunity to get behind-the-scenes, hands-on media experience. If asked, vendors may be able to organize such hands-on experiences as watching how magazines are put together, touring a newspaper printing facility or going on set to view a newscast or show production.

## Vendor Upside

In supplying tickets, making new shows available for screening or accommodating groups on tours or field trips, vendors gain a number of advantages.

These kinds of provisions from the vendor to the media unit build good will. One never knows what may make the difference between making it onto a buy or getting a larger portion of a buy. Helping the media agency keep its people informed and happy can't hurt.

You might not think that it would matter to vendors whether turnover occurs at the media agency. But it does matter. Relationships built over time are better kept in place rather than having to start from scratch should a key contact leave his or her position. Relationships represent social capital that takes time to re-create or replace. As they say, time is money-and potentially lost sales.

Also, tours and field trips help vendors demonstrate to media people how complicated their side of the equation really is, which helps to cut down on unreasonable requests.

## Media Organization Upside

The big advantage of using these tactics is that they allow media organizations to give their employees a sanity break, which reduces stress. They also give employees the opportunity to learn something they didn't know, which is fulfilling for employees and has value to the organization because it helps round the employees' experience. Since many of these tactics allow members of the team to interact as a group, they also help draw the team closer together and build esprit de corps.

Tactics that make for happier employees are good, because happier employees are less likely to leave, which has positive implications for the organization.

If employees don't leave, there's no time lost to interviewing replacement candidates. There's also less time invested in training new hires. Think about how much time your organization spends in basic training, on the ins and outs of a specific piece of business, on how the organization works.

Sometimes the person who has left is the only one who knows the answer to a particular question. New people may be faced with having to reconstruct things to determine answers that no one else can give them.

New people also have to invest a lot of time building social capital-relationships with other team members, learning to whom in the organization they need to go to accomplish things, and sometimes even in convincing others to get things done for them. Just because they've replaced a team member, it doesn't mean they have the immediate equity the old team member had. They may have to earn equity on their own.

And this is all just to get the new person up to speed with where the previous person was when he or she left. Clients don't want to see their brand waiting in neutral for the entire team to catch up.

The way to help ease the turnover burden is to proactively exercise as many of these tactics as is practical for your media unit throughout the year. They're certainly not guaranteed to keep all team members on the ship, but they should help keep employees happier, increasing both morale and knowledge. And don't forget, your first step should always be to check with your organization's management or human resources group to understand how these tactics fit with accepted company policies and ethics before implementing any of them.

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