

Wake up and smell the coffee:

how *Pret A Manger* motivates their team members

by *Richard Harpham, Pret A Manger*

Pret's people are our single greatest asset. By the time our Head Office staff has arrived in Victoria at 9am, many of our shop Team Members have been working tirelessly in our kitchens for four hours, having spent an hour commuting on night buses. Yet when our customers pop into Pret to pick up their coffees en route to the office, they are met with happy and enthusiastic Team Members. Without these Team Members, their passion, their drive and their commitment, Pret would be a mere shell of the company it is today.

With only three years of Pret experience under my belt, I am but a newcomer to the company. At a Head Office of 190 people, 30 have more than ten years' service to their name, and a couple have been with the company since the day it was formed in 1986. Pret enjoys a very low rate of Shop Team Member turnover as compared to its competition, and the results from a third-party yearly employee satisfaction survey consistently place Pret in the top 10% of companies assessed.

The retention and development of Pret's people sits at the very core of every decision that is made. From product innovation to new market expansion, the impact on staff is the only hurdle that will never be compromised. Indeed at the very heart of Pret's strategy sits the continued maintenance and development of a culture that fosters staff motivation and engagement.

Whilst Pret offers a bonus scheme to its Head Office staff, and attractive benefits to its shop Team Members, these are not materially misaligned with the competition, and cannot account for the high rates of retention Pret

experiences versus the market. It has long been suggested that it is non-monetary factors that can best incentivise staff, and this is where Pret places much of its effort.

Talking about Values

When we ask our employees why it is that they enjoy working for Pret, and what it is that keeps them smiling through the 4am starts, the response most frequently heard is that "Pret is a company I want to be a part of, because I believe in and share in its values".

Values are not created overnight, and talking about them is entirely ineffective unless they are truly lived and breathed. But when values are fully embedded within a company's culture, they are an incredibly powerful motivator, and one which cannot easily be replicated by others in the market.

At Pret, our employees are proud to talk about the values which best resonate with them. They understand Pret's passion about selling only natural, freshly-made food. They are proud to know that in some tiny way they are helping towards London's homelessness problem, as Pret distributes every unsold sandwich to homeless charities each night.

Many of our staff also have the opportunity to work with members of Pret's apprenticeship scheme – a program that seeks to help young people who, through no fault of their own, have ended up on the streets. When these apprentices join our shops, almost invariably they are scared, lacking in self-belief, and with little sense of

aspiration. There can be fewer more powerful motivators for the employees around them, than to be part of the support network that sees these vulnerable individuals blossom, and find stability in their lives once again.

Encouraging Direct and Open communication

Pret operates an “open door” policy. Nobody has an office, and even the CEO is approachable at all times. All employees, either in the Head Office or in shops, are actively encouraged to have a voice, and once quarterly there are off-site meetings for all Shop Managers and all Head Office staff to put questions or suggestions to the Board.

Every Tuesday morning sees the Head Office staff coming together for a “Team Brief”, where the Head of a particular department gives an update on their area, highlights the latest company figures, and talks about anything in “The Pret News” – most likely new shops that have opened or success stories from the week. This breaks down the information hierarchy common in many companies, as all staff have the same understanding of everything that’s going on.

Similarly in shops, every morning begins with a team talk at 7am. The General Manager of the shop brings the team together to talk through the plan for the day, and to provide an update on anything going on in the company more widely.

But whilst the sharing of information is a powerful tool in encouraging employees to become an invested part of the company, it can only be truly successful if supported by visible examples of voices being heard, and actions being effected as a result.

Recognising Talent

Recognition must surely be the easiest, yet one of the most effective ways of motivating staff. At Pret, we are keen to recognise great performance as often as possible. Our Head Office staff carry “Wow!” cards, which are handed out to any shop team member that has impressed. The top performing shops (measured against a number of factors, not all financial), are recognised monthly with a team event of their choice, and individuals that offer exceptional service can be picked out by our third-party mystery shoppers.

For individuals or teams that have truly out-performed, recognition becomes a more public event, with the incumbents called to the stage at our quarterly off-sites, and congratulated before the whole company. Any Pret employee can nominate colleagues for these awards, and the participation is extraordinary.

Providing the tools to progress

Employees at Pret are motivated by their opportunities to progress within the company. This progress can take many forms. For example, it could be a fast ascent up the rungs of the career ladder, or perhaps a broadening of responsibility within the current role. Most importantly, the success stories are visible and well communicated, and Pret’s preference for internal promotion is clear for all employees to see. In fact, two members of the Operating Board began their careers in shops 15 years ago, and almost all our Operations Managers were previously shop General Managers.

However, any aspiration to progress can only be realised if the individual has the appropriate skills. Each quarter, all employees within Pret are assessed against a matrix that crudely shows the quality of their performance against their potential. There is an open conversation about how the individual performs versus their peers, and what development is required to move to the next role, or indeed to excel in the existing one. Pret has a comprehensive library of training courses which are open to any employee looking to progress in their career, and these courses are matched to the skills gaps identified. The training courses vary tremendously, as there is as much available for the Team Member that wants to take on a Barista role, as there is for the young Head Office Manager wanting to learn about conflict resolution and how to coach rather than direct.

Perhaps most importantly, wherever possible Pret attempts to move training away from the theoretical, and towards the practical. For example, recently one of our Operations Managers mentioned that he was keen to learn more about project management, as he felt this would broaden his skill set. But rather than simply enrol him on a course, Pret matched his skills and background to a project that was about to begin, assigned him a mentor should he require the support, and gave him the opportunity to run the initiative.

Empowering employees

At Pret, employees are empowered to make decisions wherever possible. Within our shops, our General Managers are essentially responsible for businesses which turn over an average of £1.5m per annum, which is hugely motivational. They are responsible for the people they hire, the way they set production, and the way they manage costs. Since Pret provides such comprehensive training to the managers, the Head Office can afford to be relatively “hands-off” and allow the shop team to flourish. Such treatment allows Managers to be entrepreneurial at times, and the sense of ownership resonates throughout the team.

In the same way, Head Office staff are actively encouraged to involve themselves in projects which move them away from their day jobs. Given its entrepreneurial roots, Pret is still keen to embrace change and new ideas, and many of the design ideas, shop formats, and food offerings are driven by individuals within the company that spotted an opportunity to do things differently.

Conclusion

With the current economic uncertainty, there is perhaps no better a time than now to be embracing the benefits of non-monetary motivation. If times get tougher on the High Street, and revenues start to fall, the first thing that companies will need to cut is their bonus pool. Perhaps therefore, the companies best placed to weather the storm will be those that have commanded staff loyalty and passion in rather more effective ways.



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