

TNT SALES CHIEF BOOSTS MORALE AND COMPANY REVENUES

By Matthew Mullenix, Baton Rouge

There is more to business than chasing a dollar. Bobby Templet knows this, and after a lively chat in his office at TNT Welding Supply, I knew it too. Competition, enthusiasm, the thrill of the hunt—these are clearly what motivate the energetic, 51-year-old VP for Sales. Bobby speaks easily about the rewards of his work, but he rarely mentions the bottom line.

Templet is a veteran of the gas and welding business, the second generation of a successful family outfit. But his position as head of sales is new. “When I took on this job, I had one objective: to make it fun.”

Make it fun? I was surprised. Where’s the profit in that?

“People are smiling again,” said Templet, as he let me in on his latest experiment in fun equity. During the month of December 2004, Templet paired his company’s eight sales reps into four teams and drew up a list of fifty leads to follow, all cold calls on new customers. The team with the most accounts by month’s end would win a meal at one of Baton Rouge’s best restaurants. Second and third place competitors would enjoy steak dinners and good pizza, respectively. Last place finishers would earn coupons to McDonalds: “I wanted everyone to get something,” said Templet with a laugh.

Response to TNT’s slightly wacky incentive program was immediate and positive. “My sales guys were like kids on their first jobs. They were hustling for the new accounts and enjoying every minute of it.” By Templet’s figuring, an opportunity to compete would be its own reward, regardless the prize. “The contest was kind of a gimmick, but it worked!”

I pressed the new VP for a bottom line assessment, some proof in his pudding. With the contest over just a few days prior to my visit, December sales figures weren’t in. But I got the feeling my question was a little beside the point: “This is about a change in attitude, about giving my sales staff a little boost. I think the long-term effect will be better than any short-term gains.”

Templet’s instincts are on the money. Low job satisfaction and high turnover are characteristic of sales jobs in every industry. The consulting firm of William M. Mercer, Inc., surveyed over 200 companies for information regarding employee turnover and the reasons for it. Surprisingly, the lowest turnover rates were associated not with the best-paid employees but with those best satisfied by their work and workplace. Job satisfaction matters.

And it pays, too. According to business consultant William G. Bliss, President of Bliss & Associates, Inc., the cost of high turnover in your sales force is directly reflected in revenues. It’s a real cost, equal to 150% of any employee’s salary

and benefits package for every day the position stays vacant. For management and high-level sales staff, make that 200-250%. As Ray Charles liked to say, it's cheaper to keep her.

Still, I was curious. If a little friendly competition can provide a welcome kick in the pants around the shop, shouldn't you be able to measure that in dollars somewhere? Templet agreed with characteristic enthusiasm: "Well I can tell you—of the fifty calls I gave my sales guys, twenty-three turned into new accounts, and eleven bought merchandise." In a month typically slow for gas and welding gear sales, those are strong numbers.

Things look rosy from the boss's seat, but what do the sales reps think? These are experienced professionals, some with full and successful careers behind them. Do they really need a gimmick to motivate them?

"Well you hope to do the same good job every time, no matter what," said Rick Swain, 53, whose eight years with TNT cap a twenty-one year career in sales and management. "But this allowed us to bring a little play to our work and to participate in a team effort, and that helps everyone. I liked it." Swain added that he gets a charge out of the changing nature of his work—every new challenge is welcome: "I'm a very competitive person."

Bobby Templet announced the grand (and not so grand) prizes at TNT's office Christmas party. The recipients in order of greatest glory were the teams of Rick Swain/Scott Jernigan; Dave Johnson/Eddie Boney; Mark Ellis/Keith Templet; and Graham Atkins/Jay Dufour.

I called Atkins just before filing this story. I had to know how the longtime sales rep—a lifer, by his own estimation—felt about his team coming in, well, fourth in a field of four. Atkins laughed out loud. "Could we have done better? Yes." But he was quick to point me to the big picture, the combined effect of eight motivated and experienced competitors taking the field. "This was a month-long sales blitz. We were going for any and every new account. We landed a high percentage, and we got most of these in one visit. That's impressive."

It was certainly a gracious reply; but there's going to be another contest. Would Atkins have any interest in finishing first place next time? He laughed again, "Of course!" After all, he is a very competitive person.