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Cooking up camaraderie

Companies are imitating popular television shows in the office to boost employee morale to a new high

By Stacey Hirsh
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When Mark Czajka learned the Food Network was looking for groups that compete with food the way famous chefs battle on the hit show Iron Chef America, he thought it would be a great event for his office.

Czajka, who is director of new technology at Automated Graphic Systems Inc. in Charles County and a huge fan of the Food Network, e-mailed the network. If his company had its own Iron Chef competition, it could be fun for employees and great for morale, and could help recruit workers.

And so Battle Peanut Butter was born.

Twenty-seven workers participated in a bake-off that used peanut butter as the main ingredient. Workers' creations ranged from Chocolate-Stuffed Peanut Butter Brownies to Fabulous Peanut Butter Fudge, and a panel of judges (employees and company customers) chose the winner - Chocolate Trails Peanut Butter Pie.

"I thought it was a good idea for the company to come together and have a little competition and have fun with it at the same time," said Automated Graphic Systems President John Green, who had never heard of the television show until Czajka asked to launch the competition. "There's a lot of stress at work all the time, so it's good to have a chance to relax and have fun at work."

Mimicking popular television programs in the office has helped companies like Automated Graphic Systems raise their morale-building activities to a new level. Once relegated to informal conversations around the water cooler, television and other popular culture influences are being used by companies to cut across all levels of an organization for team building and other actions.

"If you can just take something that's hot off of TV or movies that generally everyone in the audience can recognize ... then you can just go right in and right to the content and make it work," said Dan Nace,

a freelance creative director in St. Louis who has conducted sales meetings based on the reality TV show Survivor.

On the show Iron Chef America, a secret ingredient is revealed at the beginning of the program. Two chefs - including one of the "Iron" or celebrity chefs - then have one hour each to create a multicourse meal using the ingredient as a theme in each dish. A panel of judges tastes the meals and votes on a winner.

In Automated Graphic Systems' version of the competition held in August, the theme ingredient was peanut butter. Instead of just two chefs, more than two dozen employees took part in the competition, baking dishes at home and bringing them in for the contest. Jace Eliason's and Robbie Robinson's Chocolate Trails Peanut Butter Pie won the competition based on taste, presentation and overall satisfaction.

The competition resulted in a lot of gooey treats and a 60-second segment that Czajka said began airing on the Food Network last month. The publicity from their peanut butter competition has had benefits beyond a day of fun at the office. Customers are excited to hear about it, Czajka said. And he hopes the television promotion will prompt others to consider working at the White Plains company.

The Food Network's program Iron Chef America was adapted from the popular Japanese show Iron Chef. The Japanese version, dubbed in English, began airing in the United States several years ago and gained widespread appeal, said Robert J. Thompson, director of Syracuse University's Center for the Study of Popular Television. The American version of the show was launched in January. Thousands of viewers responded when the Food Network asked for submissions that showed how they imitated the TV program with their own competitions, said Susie Fogelson, vice president of marketing for the Food Network.

Among the workplaces that mimicked Iron Chef America was the Coast Guard in San Francisco, where chefs from three patrol boats competed for time off. In that contest, the chefs each made a three-course meal: soup, flank steak with potato and a banana-themed dessert. While the basic ingredients were the same, each chef could prepare the dishes any way he or she chose, said Senior Chief Scott Hemphill of Coast Guard Sector Buffalo, who was a judge in the San Francisco competition before being transferred to the East Coast.

"It was pretty steep competition," Hemphill said. "Everyone was really into it and had a great time doing it."

Office events like talent contests or a show-and-tell (where workers bring in trophies and accolades they've gathered in their lifetime from non-work-related activities) can improve morale and productivity without costing the company a dime, said John Putzier, author of Get Weird -- 101 Innovative Ways to Make Your Company a Great Place to Work. They can also help with recruiting, he said.

"If you have a choice of working for two companies and the job and pay is the same but one company has some fun, too, that's the one you'll pick," Putzier said. "Work is not fun, but if you can have fun in between the work, that's better than no fun at all."

At Automated Graphic Systems, the Iron Chef America competition was the second such cook-off for the printing company. One of its departments held a chocolate-chip bake-off a few years ago.

The company sponsors several events for its employees, from a holiday party in the winter to a pig roast and crab feast in the summer, employees said. That's on top of company appreciation lunches, potluck

meals and an awards banquet where colleagues honor the production workers.

The peanut butter competition added to that tradition of morale-building activities, employees said.

"Everybody was getting excited way beforehand," said Susan Zimmerman, who works in customer service and was a judge in the competition. "You could hear them say, 'I think I'm going to make this' or 'I'm not going to tell you what I'm making.' So I think it was a nice morale thing to do."

Czajka agreed: "After the whole thing was over, we invited the entire plant to come have dessert," Czajka said. "It just kind of worked out as an event that everyone could take advantage of."

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