

Short case studies that demonstrate best practice in rewards

# Celebrating success keeps team spirits high at UKFast.Net

June Everton, HR manager at internet hosting company UKFast.Net, explains how the company's focus on team building and recognition has allowed it to maintain service levels while growing at a fast pace.

**U**KFast.Net is a business-to-business internet hosting company that is based in Manchester, England. Established in 1999 by Lawrence Jones and Gail Everton, the company provides technology solutions to leading household names such as Tesco, Sainsbury's, Orange and SKY. It specializes in managing dedicated servers for clients who have business-critical internet requirements.

When Jones decided to get involved in the technology sector, he knew customer service was crucial. With every technology company he had ever dealt with, the worst aspect of the experience was always the customer care. To build a market leader, his aim was to instill a particular work ethic into his team that would translate into a fantastic experience for clients.

## A life-changing experience

The company was established using just Jones' own collateral, and in the early

days he and Everton ran the 24/7 business themselves. They used contractors on a supply basis for the first 12 months, but a fast pace of growth meant they were then in a position to take on their first full-time employees.

Around the same time, Jones was involved in a serious accident that was to have a deep impact on him personally, but also on his approach to his business. When snowboarding in France in 2001, he was caught in an avalanche that left him unconscious under 15 feet of snow. Lucky to get out alive, Jones decided that life was about living and that every day was a chance to take on the challenge and make the best of it – an ethic that has run through UKFast.Net ever since and underlies the company's commitment to building team spirit and morale.

## Events and activities build team spirit

One of the biggest challenges for a technology company is gelling the two predominant departments – sales and technology. The success of one is based upon the commitment of the other, and vice versa, but they tend to be made up of individuals with very different skill sets and personalities. As Lawrence recruited, he realized there was a danger that a divide could develop in the organization. As a result, he and Everton generated a budget for company events to encourage

interaction and growth and to address this potential issue before it arose.

Starting out with an overwhelmingly male environment, they started to run monthly events chosen from employee suggestions. Ten-pin bowling, paintball, cinema nights and team meals allowed staff to get to know each other better, which in turn made them more responsive to each other's daily needs in the office.

As the company and the team continued to grow, in 2004 Jones decided to add a more comprehensive selection of events that would clearly celebrate the success of the team. The first of these was the Snowdon Challenge, where he and Everton, along with a selection of staff, spent a weekend in Wales climbing, dry slope skiing, tobogganing and relaxing. The Snowdon Challenge has become UKFast.Net's signature event and is repeated annually, along with the UKFast Grand Prix. Sporting activities are key to UKFast.Net's team building activities, as the company tries to encourage a healthy lifestyle that will stimulate wellbeing and keep employees physically and mentally active. The company includes special rates at local health clubs in its benefits package.

## Dealing with the challenges of growth

At the start of 2006, Jones was faced with the challenge of continuing to grow the

### UKFAST.NET

UKFast.Net is an internet hosting company based in Manchester, England. It employs 34 people and has a turnover of £3.6 million. It's a fast-growing, family-run organization that is currently showing a 14 percent increase in client numbers each month.

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company and recruit new employees without adversely impacting existing staff or customers. He brought on board a business development manager called Susie Mitchell. She was a highly recommended team motivator and growth strategist, and working together they put in place several policies to ensure communication across the team.

A "heads of departments" structure was created, and this encouraged channels through which all staff members could put forward their thoughts on improving their daily routines. More comprehensive quarterly appraisals were instigated as well as in-house training programs and a monthly outstanding person award, which offered a cash prize to the winner. The company's events have helped to smooth over some of the

## "The company tries to encourage a healthy lifestyle that will stimulate wellbeing."

difficulties experienced in bringing in new, higher level staff to such a tight-knit team by providing bonding opportunities.

The company extended its internal relations policy of motivation and recognition outwards with the launch of the UKFast Internet Awards in 2005. The awards recognize businesses on the company's network for their web designs, community sites, internet innovation, etc., with the aim of promoting competition and achievement and opening up networking among customers. The UKFast Internet Awards are part of the company's community involvement program, which also includes the UKFast Outreach Program and the Youth Sports Scheme. The former involves staff visiting local schools and institutions to talk

about opportunities and careers around the internet, and the latter promotes the benefits of sports for fitness and wellbeing to young people.

### Gaining industry recognition

The main objective of UKFast.Net's comprehensive team-building activities and recognition schemes is to help employees enjoy the time they spend at work, and in turn to maximize what they achieve during that time. The company believes that this approach, more than anything else, has produced dramatic business results.

Every year for the last four years, UKFast.Net has won a national award. In 2004, it was named Best Business ISP by Future Publishing, the organization behind some of the UK's most popular technology magazines. The shortlist was compiled by industry judges, but the final vote was down to public opinion. UKFast.Net was up against some of the biggest internet service providers in the UK, including Pipex, a competitor with a customer base 100 times bigger than its own. The company's customer service levels paid off, however, and it was announced as the winner. It has also been recognized in the UK ISPA industry awards, reflecting the strong reputation that the company has among its peers. In fact, UKFast.Net has become the only company to win the Best Hosting Provider award three years running. The basis for its victory each year has been customer service, with its "three rings and you're in" policy, which excludes the use of automated services, commended by the judges for making the organization so responsive.

The company believes its successful growth curve is a testament to its commitment to building and maintaining staff motivation. Every year since 2003, it's doubled its turnover, client base and staff.

The family-owned business made revenues in the region of £3.6 million in 2006, and with client numbers increasing by 14 percent every month, this growth curve shows no sign of relaxing.

### Taking it to the next level

Jones and Everton received another affirmation of the quality of their internal relations in March this year, when they gained UK Investors in People status. The assessor reported that they had "built up a very loyal, committed and well-motivated workforce. They celebrate success exceptionally with their team."

The success of the company's approach to staff management is inherent in its recruitment policy. It will always interview potential staff based on recommendation from existing employees, and this practice has led to a very tight community of people who want to involve their friends in their working environment. Staff retention is strong, with only one person making the decision to leave the company over the last two years.

Jones consistently reviews his targets and re-evaluates accordingly. His target for the next financial year is to become known as the "Google of the north of England," providing a working environment that inspires and encourages employees and allows them to reach their creative potential and grow the company. To prepare for this next growth phase, in May this year the company is moving to the 28th floor of Manchester's City Tower building. Jones believes that the investment in new offices highlights his faith in UKFast.NET and will add a further level of motivation to a dynamic and innovative team.

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