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Small businesses to prepare for summer

APR. 28 7:12 A.M. ET With Memorial Day just weeks away, small business owners should start summerizing their companies -- getting employees and customers ready for the changes caused by vacations and fluctuations in business. That means planning, scheduling and even making some cash flow projections.

Anticipating employee vacations is perhaps the most important part of preparing a company for summer.

Leslie Yerkes, president of Catalyst Consulting Group in Cleveland, said it's important for employees to be able to take guilt-free vacations, and so it's equally important for their work to be done in their absence. Bosses and the employees themselves need to arrange for co-workers to cover for them.

Yerkes also said workers should be allowed to leave the office behind when they take time off.

"Plan ahead for them ... so people don't have to take all of their work and their cell phones and e-mail with them," she said.

The time to do that is now, so everyone knows what to expect when vacation season arrives. If employees feel they're getting work dumped on them at the last minute, anger and resentment will soon follow -- especially if they feel they're being given more work than they can comfortably handle.

At companies whose high season is during the summer, owners often have to tell employees that vacations are limited. They also need to be sure they have staffers who are flexible about time off.

For Clay and Lynn Johnston, owners of three Outdoor Lighting Perspectives franchises in Virginia, the spring and summer are their busiest times, and sometimes they've had to tell a worker that the company can't accommodate a vacation request.

The couple has found it's helpful to hire employees who easily adapt to the demands of the business. Lynn Johnston said many of their employees are older people who have taken early retirement and are looking for something to do with their time.

"It doesn't really bother them to work though the spring and summer and they're happy to take a winter vacation," she said.

Another facet of planning for vacations means letting customers know when you or employees will be away. It can be very irritating to a customer to call up and find out, "Fred's not here, talk to Joe" -- especially if the customer has no idea who Joe is.

Brad Phillips, whose Phillips Media Relations LLC is a one-man shop, makes sure his clients know about his planned vacations well in advance. Phillips, based in Washington, D.C., said he's already let clients with long-term contracts know that he's getting married and going on his honeymoon in September.

"Generally speaking, I know well in advance what my vacation window is going to be," Phillips said. "So if I sign a contract or engage in work with a client during that time when I'm going to be on vacation, I put it in the contract."

Like many business owners, Phillips does make himself available in the case of emergencies, provided he's vacationing in the United States.

Employers should also plan for some fun in their companies -- and treat the summer as an opportunity to boost worker morale.

"Take advantage of things that come naturally to the summertime and incorporate them into the business," Yerkes said, suggesting that owners might want to periodically bring in hot dogs and hamburgers, have a picnic or do something else that might similarly lift everyone's spirits.

Many companies give workers a little extra time off in the summer, scheduling half-days on Fridays. The Devon Group, based near the New Jersey shore, lets its workers leave at 3 p.m. on Fridays from early June to Labor Day -- allowing employees of the public relations firm to beat the influx of beach traffic that could turn a 20-minute commute into a two-hour ordeal.

With customers also taking vacations, business does slow for many companies -- and that can lead to problems for firms that don't plan ahead for a drop in revenue, said Sam Waltz, owner of Sam Waltz & Associates, a Wilmington, Del., business and marketing consultancy. Companies still have to pay their overhead even if their accounts receivables are smaller.

"That can end up being a very difficult time," Waltz said.

The solution, as it is with vacations, is to be planning now. Don't spend more than you need to; keep a cushion that you can dip into when the summer slump comes along.

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