



Feature: Endless Rewards

Recognized for creating a corporate culture that develops outstanding people and sets a national standard for human resources excellence, Ward Lumber was named a co-winner of the NLBMDA 2003 Excellence in Human Resources Award. Here's why.

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By Chris Wood

Ward Lumber embraces a host of HR programs to empower communication, encourage professional growth, and enrich the morale and service of company team members.

It doesn't take long to experience the culture at three-unit Jay, N.Y.-based Ward Lumber firsthand. Walking through the doors of the pro dealer's Plattsburgh, N.Y., location, contractors and prospective employees alike often are greeted by Woody Ward, the Ward woodchuck mascot that also stops in at company barbecues and skates between periods when Ward sponsors a night of hockey at Plattsburgh State University for employees, customers, and friends. If human resources (HR) is the one area of business where lumberyards are allowed to get warm and fuzzy, Woody Ward definitely nails the act as Ward Lumber's ambassador of open corporate communication, team building, mentoring, and employee growth empowerment.

But it doesn't stop at the entryway to the stores. When it comes to indoctrinating new hires, for example, Ward may stick to traditional recruitment strategies—including promotion from within, job postings, advertisements, and recruitment firms—but the company also employs an all-out approach to new hire orientation and retention through the 90-day mark. "There is a tremendous amount of investment that we make in bringing people on board in training and orientation and finger-crossing to get them through the first 90 days," says Ward vice president of human resources Jim Rushia. "We need to keep things interesting, and we need to listen. If new hires don't understand something, we either need to retrain them or train them more properly. If we can get them past the first 90 days, there's a very good chance we've got them hooked."

Dangling the hook comes early. At the time of hire, each candidate learns that they are a "team member" rather than just an "employee," and receives a \$200 signing bonus. If a current team member referred the candidate to Ward, the company dispenses another \$200 bonus for the new employee plus \$200 for the referring team member.

The greenbacks are just part of shepherding new employees through the first days at Ward. More importantly, "every manager and Ward team member and HR employee that works with a new hire just has to remember what it was like the first day they were new on the job in the lumber business," explains Rushia. "We have many programs, and it can certainly be overwhelming."

Wild Communication

To further ease the transition, all new team members at Ward attend a PINE Day (Preparing Informed New Employees) orientation that includes classroom instruction on company policies, history, and philosophy; yard and component plant tours; and lunch with Agnes Ward, company treasurer, family member, and a Ward employee for 68 years. At its core, the PINE Day immersion strategy is designed to promote recognition of both the team-based company atmosphere and the value Ward places on the investment in new employees. Even the name PINE Day was spawned from a company-wide naming contest—the winner received a paid day off from work.

Such simple rewards for employee efforts at communication, team building, and furthering the collective corporate goal of making Ward “the best building supplier in northern New York” are commonplace for the company, but not insignificant. Safety programs can yield \$50 quarterly checks for accident-free work performance. A “Wild Card” program launched in 2003 allows team members to suggest new business ideas by filling out simple forms and placing them in suggestion boxes at any Ward location. Employees who send in ideas reap rewards ranging from T-shirts for low-impact ideas, to a \$100 bonus, to a day off with pay for outstanding ideas.

“To recognize people in front of their peers is the most important part of any HR program,” says Rushia, who modeled the Wild Card effort after a similar program he took part in as a 30-year HR executive for the Grand Union grocery chain. “Recognition creates a comfort level. People come to work for a reason, and ultimately the philosophy has to be that all of the team members at Ward Lumber are our customers, too. We need to keep them all happy.”

At Ward, a happy employee is an informed employee—an adage that third-generation company president Jay Ward tries hard to live by. “Communication: We need more of it. I challenge our managers to prove to me that they can overcommunicate—I guarantee that you cannot do it,” says Ward. “Spending time with our employee team is the best use of my time and my favorite element of any HR focus, and I need to focus on doing that more, as well.”

In this quest, the president hits locations several times a month for “Break with the Boss,” an informal bull-session with small groups of employees where everyone can review progress toward corporate or personal career goals, highlight achievements, or just clear the air. “Although I don't embrace the word ‘boss,’ Break with the Boss is an opportunity to update everyone on the latest and greatest and what I see going on with various company issues,” Ward says. “I'll ask for suggestions, sometimes I'll ask for action. But my main goal is to answer questions. It's been a vital program because the team members are getting information that they are craving for—and information that I want people to know.”

Power to the People

Getting powerful corporate information into Ward team members' hands also comes in the form of open-book corporate financial planning, something that Ward hopes is beginning to gain ground among pro dealers. “I do financials at least twice a year and show everyone the numbers. I think that is becoming more common in our industry. I hope so. The mushroom theory of management—keep employees in the dark, feed them lots of crap—that just doesn't work anymore.” To encourage team member participation while reviewing the numbers or at other important meetings, Ward has adopted what he calls “the \$5 question.” At the beginning of the meeting, he slaps a \$5 bill on the table and the first employee to ask a relevant question during the meeting pockets the cash.

Empowerment also comes in the form of training. With North Country winters keeping building activity light for part of the year, Ward holds off-site management training summits in January and a corporate-wide sales training conference in February. Additionally, Ward periodically runs employees through “Legendary Customer Care,” an off-the-shelf 14-module customer service training program, and sends team members to network with other pro dealers at product knowledge and customer service seminars at the Northeastern Retail

Lumber Association in Rensselaer, N.Y.

“I’ve been treated like family here for 25 years, but I come back to work every day because Ward Lumber is proactive,” says pro account manager Rolland Tromblee of the corporate investment in training. “We reach out not only within our own company, but [also] out into the industry with training and into the builder community with service, and that makes a difference to our customers.”

It makes a big difference to employees as well. “We all give 125 percent,” attests Ward CFO Debby Straight. “We all perform, because performance is fostered here.” Indeed, as part of Ward’s “Bench Building” program, each yard manager is periodically asked to identify employees who—with additional investments in training—have the right attitude to become one of five supervisor types, from sales to manufacturing to yard manager, in the course of their Ward careers. Employees are then interviewed and a strategy plan is drawn up indicating what types of training they might need before eventually assuming a management role—even if it includes a stint in the Woody Ward woodchuck costume.

For Rushia, the Bench Building program rolls all of Ward’s HR efforts at communication, team and morale building, and employee empowerment into one package. “There’s nothing more demoralizing than constantly posting jobs and seeing someone come from the outside and get the position every time,” he says. “Whether it is the VP of human resources or whatever, a company of this size needs to be self-sufficient. So the Bench Building program is something that we continue to nurture and an example of the future of this company. If we recognize our people, and give them the tools to move forward, they can step up to the plate and do anything.”

Vital Statistics

Company: **Ward Lumber**

Headquarters: **Jay, N.Y.**

Year founded: **1890**

Number of locations: **3**

Number of employees: **160**

2003 gross sales: **\$22 million**

Pro sales percentage: **70 percent**

The Total Package

At day one, Ward Lumber presents new hires with an almost endless checklist of benefits.

Barbecues? Check. Leadership and sales training? Check. Vision Plan? Check. Guy dressed up in a woodchuck suit skating at hockey games? Check.

Every HR manager knows that the total compensation package goes way beyond salary—that a huge chunk of employee investment is comprised of health care, insurance, and work-life benefits. But getting new hires to key-in to the total package is not always easy.

To breach the learning curve, Ward Lumber has developed a benefits dossier that is presented to each new employee. The one-page document features 47 must-have extras, frills, and perks that come with a Ward paycheck. Some of the more unique benefits include:

- Voter registration. To encourage employees to develop a community voice, Ward will register new

employees to vote and also offers a day off with pay for team members to hit the polls.

- Safety shoe reimbursement. With safety as a top corporate priority, Ward shows a lot of “sole.” The company provides an annual \$50 allowance to each employee toward the purchase of steel-toed footwear.
- Ward Lumber hockey night. Anyone in true “Upstate” New York (north of Albany) lives for the drop of the puck, and Ward employees are no strangers to the “Coolest Game on Earth.” The company sponsors a night of Plattsburgh State University Hockey for team members, friends, and customers. The company woodchuck mascot even laces up the skates to hit the ice between periods.

“We always review the benefits sheet at the time of hire,” says Ward vice president of human resources Jim Rushia. “And we hammer home that our benefits aren’t based on management level or seniority—everyone is eligible for everything.”

Co-Winner - Dixie Lumber: <i>Personal Touch</i>



From CFO Debby Straight (left) to yard sales assistants Steve Giddings (top right) and Mark Wilkens (bottom right), Ward Lumber employees are provided with an extensive benefits package and are empowered to perform to maximum potential.

Goodwill ambassador “Woody Ward” (left) welcomes contractors to Ward Lumber, where team members like (clockwise from center) Judy Williams, Mary Rankin, Jim Rushia, and Jay Ward all aim to foster a rewarding business environment.

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