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## Ask the Experts: Should Your Firm Be Offering More 'Green' Rewards?

*With companies of all types and sizes looking for ways to become more socially responsible, a move toward "greener" reward programs can't be far behind*

When Aetna opened a new "green" customer center – a facility where it entertains large accounts – the company decided that its local employee "Champion" reward program should also be green, to tie in with the theme and goals of the new facility. So it turned to Excitations (<http://www.engagementstrategiesonline.com/trek?t=202&c=3&p=0&v=0&ar=2207&d=http://www.excitations.com>), the exclusive provider of Discovery Channel experiences, to provide an assortment of green experiences that Aetna employees could choose from.

"We've had quite a few companies asking about or indicating an interest in the whole concept of using experiences as rewards because they're interested in having their reward programs be greener," says Nancy Lamberton, a founding partner of VA-based Excitations. "And the fact that a large percentage of our experiences involve people going out, enjoying nature and learning more about nature in and of itself encourages a greater environmental awareness and is very much in line with green gifting and rewards."

The "experience assortment" that Excitations put together included a lot of things that don't require a motorized vehicle, including guided city bike tours, guided kayak and snorkel adventures, white-water rafting, glider flights, caving tours, eagle observation cruises, star-gazer canoe adventures and a wolf-watch in a natural setting, "where a naturalist explains what's going on and how the wolves are interacting," says Lamberton, adding that local experience rewards not only involve eco-friendly activities, but because they're closer to home and don't involve air travel, the whole reward involves a smaller carbon footprint.

She also notes that Excitations didn't exclude non-green experiences in the program it put together for Aetna. "But when we packaged it for them, we put only green experiences in the gift package, so they would see those and highlight those – but participants were free to choose other things if they wanted to. And if a client wants a more exclusively green selection, we can certainly do that for them."

Is it paying off? "Companies of all types are looking for big and small ways to show that they're good corporate citizens from the standpoint of the environment, and we expect green reward programs to be something of a growing trend," Lamberton says.

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### What Makes It Green?






At Hinda Incentives (<http://www.engagementstrategiesonline.com/trek?t=202&c=3&p=0&v=0&ar=2207&d=http://www.hinda.com>), the reward catalog has a special "leaf" icon to indicate which of its offerings are green, and for some of its more environmentally-conscious clients it will call out and highlight these products. It also highlights its green products occasionally in its general communications to clients and program participants. But what makes a product or reward experience truly green?

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David Peer, Hinda's VP of Client Services, suggests that you have to be careful with that green designation. "With the emergence of green as such an important thing in the public's mind, many marketers are pretty indiscriminate about assigning the term 'green' to their products," he says, "and you have to be diligent about ensuring that if a product is designated as having green qualities that it indeed has those qualities."

Some of the things that can earn the green label in the Hinda catalog, for instance, include bamboo purses and sustainable wood products. But they can also include electronic products with low-energy consumption, those carrying the EnergyStar designation, or products that are made with recycled materials. "But stainless steel cookware can also carry the designation if the manufacturing process has been vetted to be minimally polluting," Peer notes. "And all of that requires a lot more due diligence on the part of incentive company purchasers to ensure that you're buying from companies that are rigorous and responsible about their manufacturing processes."

Performing that kind of due diligence means green manufacturing and environmental consciousness are increasingly a part of the conversation with suppliers and customers. "You're asking questions to ensure that you do business with reputable people and do a better job of vetting who you do business with," Peer explains, "[things like] the manufacturing process, where products are manufactured, what environmental standards are used, if any child labor is involved."

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## More Than Just Products

Being green also involves more than just offering green products. Incentive companies own policies and practices are coming under scrutiny by some of the more socially responsible corporations they deal with.

"We have a couple of levels of green commitment, says Hinda CEO Michael Arkes. "Most companies have done away with non-recyclable stuffing for packaging, so we don't use the bubbles that people used to use in the past. But we also take the cartons that the product comes to us in and compress those and give them to a recycling company. Internally, we also have a team that looks for ways to make us more green, so now we no longer use paper plates in the office lunch room, and we have recycle containers for batteries, ink cartridges and other recyclables in the office."

At Excitations, reward program customers can opt for electronic e-mail notification of gifts and rewards, "so there's not actually any packaging involved," says Nancy Lamberton. "Some companies prefer having the packaging because they want to physically put something in their employee's hand, but the electronic option also makes a nice presentation. It's an attractive notice that provides a description of their experience and gives them a unique card number to use when they're ready to book the experience – and it's all done electronically, very environmentally-friendly."

To encourage the use of its paperless presentation, Excitations will make a donation to the Nature Conservancy on behalf of clients who opt for its "E-card."

Peer reports that Hinda has also done away with its all-inclusive "big book" print catalog – "and we're printing a smaller version that's meant to reflect what we do but not include everything, and that's a great saving of resources."

Arkes adds that such efforts are becoming more important to some corporate incentive customers. "We're seeing a number of RFPs from larger corporations asking about our environmental practices," he says. "During a post-RFP interview with one corporate buyer, we learned that such questions were there to do more than just fill space. It was one of the important considerations for this company. We're seeing more RFPs including questions like these, and more companies placing greater importance on the answers."

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## Going Beyond Green

Michael Arkes says that social responsibility is the broader issue, illustrated by the growing number of companies that offer economic opportunity to the disadvantaged and underprivileged. "In third-world countries, women don't typically have a lot of work opportunities, and a number of companies are helping women obtain employment by making crafts and selling the craft products in the U.S.," he says. "In addition, there are companies in the U.S. that are creating work for people who face employment barriers – people who've been on welfare and don't have any work experience, women in domestic violence shelters and people who've been incarcerated, for instance, and they make crafts, baked goods and other food products."

Not only does Hinda make use of many of these products in its own reward catalog, but Arkes has created a company called Helping Hand Rewards, which was developed to help introduce many of these companies to the incentive market. "We're doing marketing and business development for these social enterprises," he says, "making sales calls, showing at The Motivation Show, sending out press releases – whatever it takes to make these companies visible to the incentive market."

The goal of Helping Hand Rewards, Arkes explains, "is to generate more sales for these entities so they can hire more people and become more self-sustaining and less dependent on donations."

Clients seem to be responsive to both appeals – being more green and being more socially responsible. "The initial response for many of the people we're calling on is, 'This is great.' And for the typical corporate buyer, it's kind of a no-brainer," says Arkes. "They just say, 'Fine, put it in the assortment.' There's been a lot of research now that shows that being green and being socially responsible is good for business. So there's no reason for them to say no."

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## A Greener Future?

Both Arkes and Lamberton agree that the drive to become greener and more socially responsible is mostly coming from customers at this point, and that the incentive industry itself needs to get moving.

"The industry needs to catch up," Arkes says. "Our customers are going to keep raising the bar, and we're going to have to continue to move forward to catch up with them. A greener consciousness and corporate social responsibility are here to stay. It's the demographics of the population – young people in particular are becoming more concerned about the environment and more concerned about corporate responsibility. And as these people move into management positions, they're going to expect the companies they do business with to be green and responsible too."

"We see more interest from both individual consumer and corporate accounts in how they can be more conscious of the environment," notes Lamberton, "so we'll be continuing to add more and more green experiences. We're in the process of adding more experiences to our portfolio right now, in fact, and the green ones are a big focus for us."

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