

Win Top Talent

By meeting the needs of today's employees, from career development to flexible schedules, c-store retailers can remain competitive and attract high performers

By Tammy Mastroberta



FINDING AND RETAINING TOP TALENT has always been a challenge for the convenience store industry, but with the U.S. unemployment rate the lowest it's been in 17 years, the competition today is greater than ever.

The unemployment rate hit 3.9 percent in May. The last time it remained below 4 percent for a sustained period of time was in the late 1960s.

In this market, it's more important to stand out amongst competitors, and there are some key factors for convenience store retailers to consider, including career development, growth, wages, benefits, flexible schedules and the overall working environment.

"Our brand in the community is very strong, so we are able to attract talent because of our reputation," said Maureen Henson, director of human resources at Jacksonville, Fla.-based Gate Petroleum, which operates approximately 100 Gate-branded convenience stores, while providing fuel for an additional 200 operators. "We strive to connect with the candidate quickly and then in the interview process, we showcase

our training, team environment, and growth opportunities for the future."

Today's employees at all levels are looking for growth and development. Having a strong and dedicated program to accomplish this can help a company stand out to potential employees, said Sam Neff, manager of the Human Resources Center of Expertise at TriNet, a consulting company based in Dublin, Calif.

At Gate Petroleum, the goal is to cultivate talent from within. The chain has a structured training suite of products that managers go through to advance. Individuals can apply for this training, but there is a structured approval process and a formal interview process, Henson explained.

"All employees should have a development plan tracked and managed, so you always know what is happening with them — both positive feedback and constructive criticism," Neff said. "Don't wait until the annual review to provide feedback. Provide it continuously."

Today's workers are also looking for a mission or purpose they can get behind, he added. This should be used as a way to draw in the right candidates — from the job post to the interview process to starting the job. Neff also recommends setting clear goals from the first day and making sure they align with the organization's strategic objectives.

"Competitive benefits and wages are always important, but

we also find most employees want to feel like they are part of something,” Henson echoed. “We create a strong team environment and show we care about our employees and their families.”

A company should connect the dots for employees so they see how their daily tasks connect to the strategic goals of the organization and how they are helping contribute to the overall mission, according to Neff.

Another key factor in attracting and retaining top employees is relationships at work. This includes relationships with colleagues, leaders, managers, customers and vendors. Providing access to decision makers should be a priority, said Bruce Tulgan, founder and CEO of Rainmaker Thinking, a consulting firm based in Whitneyville, Conn.

“What is unique about us is our top leaders are in the stores every single day,” Gate’s Henson shared. “They get to know employees and they have a face that goes with the name, so employees feel more comfortable and a part of the Gate family.”

When it comes to wages, it may be difficult to break out of the basic wage structure, but what c-stores can do is offer performance-based

compensation with clear benchmarks and rewards for going the extra mile, Tulgan advised.

“While baseline pay and benefits should be comparable to the competition, having clearly defined opportunities to earn more based on extra-mile effort and extra-mile results can make a difference,” he noted. “For example, cleaning up the counters while nobody is in the store, or offering exceptional customer service. Make it clear they can earn more over and above their basic pay based on their performance.”

The Recruitment Process

The first step in recruiting top talent is to advertise in the right places, and be sure the job description will bring in the right people for the job and the company.

“A job post should paint an accurate picture of the organization. It’s a place for a company to start telling their story. The mission and purpose should be included there, so the right candidates gravitate to the job,” Neff said, explaining that each position should have a custom job description that lists and outlines the essential functions and duties of that job, as well as the skillset needed to carry them out.

Companies need to be strategic about where they are posting their ads, and think about what the ideal employee looks like and where you would find them. This could include social media, online community message boards, a local newspaper or networking groups, Neff suggested.

“Another underutilized source is state workforce development agencies,” he said. “Partnering with them can allow employers to tap into a vast applicant pool. A lot of organizations still do campus recruiting and participate in job fairs, which is another viable avenue.”

Call to Action

- With the U.S. unemployment rate so low, it’s more important than ever to stand out amongst competitors. Some key factors for convenience store retailers to consider are career development, growth, wages, benefits, flexible schedules and the overall working environment.
- Today’s workers are looking for a mission or purpose they can get behind. A company should connect the dots for employees so they see how their daily tasks connect to the strategic goals of the organization and how they are helping contribute to the overall mission.
- When it comes to wages, it may be difficult to break out of the basic wage structure, but c-stores can offer performance-based compensation with clear benchmarks and rewards for going the extra mile.
- A job post should paint an accurate picture of the organization. It’s a place for a company to start telling their story.
- Companies need to be strategic about where they are posting their job ads. Think about what your ideal employee looks like and where you would find them. This could include social media, online community message boards, a local newspaper or networking groups.
- Be selective in who actually gets hired. During the interview process, present all the positive points, but then try and scare the person away by telling them all the downsides. See who is left.
- To retain top employees, talent management is important. High performers are often looking to advance within a company. Providing the employee with a path to improve their skills, which can lead to more opportunities, lets them know the company is invested in them.



HOW TO

Over the past few years, social media has become a bigger player in job recruitment and within the last three years, it has become a must, Henson observed.

“You have to have a vivid presence on social media, but it’s hard to differentiate yourself that way,” Tulgan cautioned, suggesting retailers also build relationships with parents, teachers and career centers, as well as community college professors and career advisors. “Differentiate by going and seeing human beings face-to-face.”

Gate Petroleum has a strong commitment to veterans because many of its sites are in military locations. The retailer also utilizes its stores to advertise job postings.

A new avenue for Gate Petroleum is using Snag-A-Job, which automates the onboarding process to provide a more seamless experience for applicants and helps managers by cutting down on paperwork, said Henson.

“It also has a component that focuses on personality traits, with a series of questions to identify if a candidate is a match to our environment,” she noted.

The Interview Process

The initial interview is an opportunity to present benefits offered, the mission of the company and the overall environment to a prospective employee.

C-store operators should highlight benefits such as performance-based pay, supportive leadership,

control over their own schedule, learning opportunities and a team culture — all of which are top priorities for many employees today, according to Tulgan.

It’s important to sell the position, and then make sure the prospective employee is a good fit for the organization as a whole, rather than just hiring “warm bodies,” he said.

“The workforce has changed greatly in the last 10 or so years and companies need to keep evolving, too,” Henson said. “Doing the same thing you did in the past is not going to attract or retain top talent. Today, the interview is more individualized and more of a discussion to find out what the employee wants now and in the future, and helping them to achieve that. It’s not just what the company wants, but also what the employee needs and how we can help both.”

Companies should not be afraid to ask probing questions, which allow someone to understand exactly what an applicant brings to the table, Henson noted. Asking behavioral questions is also an effective way to understand a candidate’s experience and reveal how they would react to situations they may face in the workplace.

“Come up with some common situations and see how they would respond,” Neff shared. “This will give you a good picture of how they would respond if you hire them.”

It’s important to be selective in who actually gets hired — which means the bigger the applicant pool, the better. Once a company presents all the positive points of working for them, the next thing to do is try and scare the person away, Tulgan said.

“Tell them the downsides and see who is left, and then test them. Give them a realistic job preview, even having them come in and watch what it’s like to actually do the job,” he suggested.

The Retainment Process

After going through the recruitment process and hiring the right employees, keeping top performers is the next priority, as c-stores often struggle with high turnover. Retainment starts with a successful onboarding process.

“Our model of a perfect onboarding process is the Marines boot camp,” Tulgan said. “Now, you may not have a 24-hour day, but you can do a 13-week onboarding process.”

It’s important to push out low performers because high performers don’t like to work with them, Tulgan added. Low performers disrupt the culture, create problems that high performers have to fix, and turn management into police.

Rather, a manager should take on the role of coach. “The manager is the chief retention officer,” Tulgan explained. “They help the people who are ambitious advance, get the schedule they want and stay in dialogue with them, so they



can identify if someone is unhappy or thinking about leaving and give them a reason to stay and work harder.”

Overall talent management is important to top talent, who are often looking to advance within a company. Providing the employee with a path to improve their skills, which can lead to more opportunities, lets them know the company is invested in them. This leads to retention, Neff explained.

“Training new employees in cash management and then advancing them to training in inventory management can lead to them becoming a supervisor,” he noted. “This should be clearly illustrated when they are starting out, so they know what the path looks like. And cross training employees is also good for retention and gives the company greater flexibility as well.”

Talent management is about recognition and managing and documenting performance — not just when someone is in trouble, but also when they do something good. As Tulgan puts it, “Imagine if in baseball, we only tracked strikes and not home runs to keep score.”

At Gate, the chain’s commitment to its employees, from onboarding and training to access with senior leaders,

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is important to the company. Gate cares about each employee and is always working to upgrade training, according to Henson.

“We have a team-oriented and fair environment, and ensure we do the best for our people. Part of that is the commitment of senior leaders being in our stores every single day,” she said. **CSN**