



First Place | Small Company BeneServ Corporate Benefit Services

Yes, you can build office rapport around scheduled snacking

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Like the century-old comic strip icons Alphonse and Gaston, Russ Carlson and Marie Wahl are stumbling over one another to give credit for the track record of human resource excellence at BeneServ Corporate Benefit Services.

"After you," says one. "No, I insist, after you!"

Whoever started the ball rolling, it's clear that together this team has created a positive workplace. As president, Carlson credits Wahl with inaugurating fruit time.

Claims Specialist Wahl says she couldn't have done it without the boss' support.

Um, fruit time? Sure, that would be 3 p.m. every day, when Wahl announces to all that it is time to eat fruit. "It's a silly thing, but it makes them happy. It gets them away from the phones, from the pressures of dealing with clients, dealing with

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Russ Carlson
President

business," Carlson said. "And it has to be fruit, it can't be a Tastykake. Nothing against Tastykake, of course."

The coffee-and-tea stretch arrives at 2 o'clock and the Peppermint Patty break rounds out the day at 4 o'clock. These are not exactly traditional benefits, but they seem to work. Carlson said it keeps people cheerful and motivated and one can't help but observe that the breaks cost the business virtually nothing.

None of this could happen without Wahl, Carlson said. Her energy, drive and organizational ability are what generates the spirit of enthusiasm in the office.

Wahl in turn credits her boss. "A majority of it is Russ, and how he acts toward us."

The office could never buzz along so happily, she said, if Carlson did not make people feel good about themselves and their work. Everything he does seems to project an air of genuine caring, she said.



Russ Carlson with a group of employees. The office takes regular breaks for fruit, drinks and Peppermint Patty's.

ELV. MILLER III

"Over the course of 30 years, I have never had this before," said Wahl, who has worked for small private companies and big corporations, plus seven years at BeneServ.

"I have worked in businesses where you do a job and you feel like you do it well, but no one ever actually comes out and says 'thank you' or 'good job.' But I think that people need that," she said. "[Carlson] thanks us everyday for the work that we did. Who does that?"

The occasional expression of gratitude is a simple thing, but it goes a long way.

The \$1.9 million business of BeneServ is somewhat more dry than the daily round of festive breaks might suggest. Its seven sales people and seven administrators in Springfield sell health insurance to local companies and then support those companies' employees as they access those benefits.

Carlson, who has run the company since 1985, does so with a particular kind of openhandedness. In addition to selling insurance, he helps clients manage their coverage: His administrative staff adds and removes employees from policies, re-

searches unpaid claims and handles the vast administrative burden of COBRA.

That's an unusual range of support services in an industry where the broker's role typically begins and ends with making a sale and cashing the commission checks. Carlson decided early on to deliver such services without charging extra.

This approach may date back to Carlson's younger days in a family that struggled financially, that in fact spent some time on welfare. Carlson says those experiences helped him understand what it is to need, and what it is to give.

Thinking about what he might give to his staff, Carlson seems to have hit on a formula of giving not just benefits (about which he knows a thing or two) but also giving quality-of-life perks. That means, among other things, loosening up on the traditional schedule.

"Insurance is very structured, very black and white. You do your job, you take a 10-minute break here or there," he said. "We try not to be that way."

Carlson never loses sleep wondering if flex time might be abused. "I don't have to watch over people. Everyone gets the

work done. I very rarely have a problem and when something does come up we work through it," he said.

"Everybody's friendly; it is a 'we' situation — we are all in this together. If one person has a bad day, if someone on the phone is yelling at them or cursing at them, they will talk it out with the others," he said. As a result, "we don't have turnover."

Do people really yell and curse at BeneServ employees? Sure they do. This is customer service, after all. "When somebody calls, they are not calling just to say hello. They are calling because something is wrong. So that person may not be all that happy," Carlson said.

That makes it all the more important for BeneServ staff to feel good about their jobs — and they do. The employees themselves say so, and the customers affirm it.

"Clients rave about our customer service," Carlson said. "They know that when they call in, that call will get answered on the first ring, and it will be answered by someone who is happy."

"That is how it is. When you are eating a Peppermint Patty, you are happy." ■