

## George Fina, President, Michael C. Fina Company

**R**ecognition has come to involve a whole lot more than just passing out lapel pins or watches as service awards to celebrate employees' milestone anniversaries. That's just one of the lessons that George Fina, President of Michael C. Fina Company, has learned in his long career in the recognition industry.

"Men stopped wearing suits as lifestyles changed and corporations became more dressed down," Fina says. "And customers no longer wanted to just get a pin or a key ring. They didn't appreciate the value of these types of gifts and wanted something to go along with their lifestyle." And most importantly, he adds, "The employee needed a heavy dose of recognition by his or her company to go along with the gift."

Michael C. Fina started as a retail company with a fine gift store in New York City – where it still has its flagship store – and its move into the recognition business began almost accidentally in the 1960s, as customers began to ask for corporate gift items to use for conferences, directors' meetings and other events. By the 1990s, there were enough of those requests to warrant the creation of a Corporate Division, and since then the company has grown to have some 40 sales reps, a company in the UK, a distribution center in Canada and an increasingly global corporate recognition business.



George Fina started his career working in the store. "I packed packages and I worked 20-hour days around Christmastime when we needed the help," he says, adding that it's important to note that the company has maintained its retail business even as the corporate division has grown. "We sell very high-quality merchandise, and we transfer this quality consumer product expertise to the products we use in our incentive programs. We select an item for a recognition program as if it were going into our showroom or our consumer website – based on the quality of the product, if it will be popular and if the customer will want it."

Fina also understands, however, that success in the recognition and incentive industry in today's marketplace requires far more than selecting quality products for a reward catalog. "With issues like employee retention and employee engagement on their minds, companies know that they have to provide a recognition experience for their employees and not just a gift," he says.

### Recognition: Key to Engagement

To help to create that experience, the company years ago developed what it calls its "Magic Box." The box is meant to be used by an employee's manager on the day of a recognition presentation. "The manager makes the presentation before the employee's peers," Fina says, "and in the Magic Box there's a framed certificate of recognition, a letter of congratulations from the CEO of the company, a small gift like a key ring or pen – or a tie tack or lapel pin for the companies that don't want to give those up – and a catalog from which the employee can choose a lifestyle gift that will be shipped to the home."

Currently, the company is developing what it calls its "Total Recognition" concept, where companies can bundle all of their different recognition initiatives – safety, wellness, service awards, retirement awards and others – into one program, and employees can store points earned in all of these programs to become eligible for even better gifts.

This approach also gives companies the opportunity to expand the

reach and impact of their recognition programs. "We can add an early recognition component," Fina says, "so that employees receive some form of congratulatory communication at 30 days, at 90 days and at six months, as well as a gift at one year of service and subsequent milestones." Not every service marker will involve formal recognition or a gift, he says, but there's what Fina calls a "continuous onboarding" of new employees which could simply involve a congratulatory e-mail message to the employee and an e-mail to the employee's manager noting progressive service marks and suggesting some form of personal notice or congratulations.

In the healthcare industry, Fina points out, where there's a critical shortage of nurses, some hospital programs have added a component that gives out points on hiring a new nurse – "sort of like a signing bonus," he says – or when a current staff member refers a potential new employee. Recognition efforts like this and others will be especially important to attract and keep "Millennials" and other younger employees, as well as keep older employees engaged and on the job longer.

Michael C. Fina itself has what it calls a RAVE program for in-house recognition. "It's a nomination program by which employees can nominate another employee or group of employees in recognition of efforts that tie in with our core values as a company," Fina says. "As far as I'm concerned, it's one of the best things that we ever did."

And that's an important added dimension, Fina explains: "We usually do these programs in a way that they tie into a company's core values, mission and vision as a way to increase the level of commitment and engagement on the part of all employees. You can really show companies the ROI on this after running this type of program for a year or two."

### Keeping Managers Involved

Here's another important lesson that Fina has learned from his involvement in the evolution of recognition programs and the recognition industry: However sophisticated a program becomes – even if the company has outsourced the program totally and even if you have the best program in the world – it's not going to be effective unless frontline managers buy into the program and support it. "They say that people don't leave companies, they leave supervisors," Fina says, "and that's true. And an important part of all of our programs is getting the supervisor to understand how important it is to think about and recognize the people working under them – and how their efforts can help in terms of employee engagement, commitment and retention."

A large part of Fina's recognition programs, in fact, involve communication and training for managers and supervisors. "We have training videos for managers, so they know how to make an effective recognition presentation. If the employee is in an office environment, we suggest a different way of doing it than if they're in the warehouse or on a factory floor," Fina says. "We have a video that explains how to give a presentation over the phone for a remote employee," he adds. "They should make sure they have some background information on the employee, they have to include some detail about the person's history with the company and they should try to include other people who are important to the employee on the conference call."

Overall, Fina suggests that the key to successful recognition is less about length of service and "more about how you engage employees – what is the 'secret sauce' in terms of how often you should be doing it, what you should be saying and how you tie your business strategy to daily performance, all with the goal of keeping people loyal and committed and staying on with your organization." **MS**