

HR IN SMALL BUSINESS

Employees Make a Difference at Amy's Ice Creams

One of the bright spots for hungry people in Austin, Texas, is Amy's Ice Creams—its factory on Burnet Road or one of several Amy's stores. Founder Amy Miller, who dropped out of medical school to start the business, figures it is just another way to “make a difference in people's lives,” offering customers a fun place to celebrate or cheer up.

Miller had been paying for med school with a job at Steve's Ice Cream, but when the company was sold, she thought the new owners were too stodgy, so she opened her own ice cream shop. Given the motivation to strike out on her own, it's not surprising that her goal is to manage her employees in a different way, one that combines informal fun with care for others.

The spirit of fun is defined by the employee selection process Miller invented. When interviewing candidates, Miller hands them a white paper bag with the instruction to “make something creative” and show her later. One applicant used it to make a hot-air balloon. Another put food in a bag, gave it to a homeless person, took a photo of the gift, and put the photo in the bag to return as the creative offering.

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While the two painted concrete cows that sit in front of the Amy's factory are an emblem of the company's commitment to fun, its commitment to caring has a more uplifting sign: Amy's Ice Creams funded the construction of a room in a local children's cancer care center. The room resembles an ice cream shop and includes freezers stocked with ice cream—a treat that patients can share with visiting family members.

Service to the community is also connected to employee engagement. At Amy's, the employees choose the charities the company will support. At a prom hosted by Amy's every year, the company selects a King and Queen to honor based on which employees did the most company-sponsored charitable work. In this way, employee rewards are tied to the company's value.

Fun and community service aren't just a way to be nice; they also have made Amy's Ice Creams a company ice cream lovers care to buy from. The company reaps millions of dollars in sales and has expanded the number of locations to meet growing demand in Austin as well as in Houston and San Antonio. Still, it's not just about the revenues. Co-owner (and Amy's husband) Steve Simmons told a reporter, "We never want to be a mega-company. When we don't know employees' names, there's a problem."