

NORTH COUNTY TIMES

NEWS FROM CARLSBAD, LA COSTA, OCEANSIDE, VISTA, CAMP PENDLETON, ENCINITAS, SOLANA BEACH, DEL MAR AND ALL NORTH COUNTY

Facts Facts

These are the “Six Principles for Organizational Excellence,” from Sandy Asch’s Alliance for Organizational Excellence.

- 1. Use your word wisely:** You communicate with quality and integrity in a way that inspires others to action.
- 2. Be accountable:** You are proactive and passionate even in tough circumstances.
- 3. Focus:** You align your daily actions and behaviors with what matters most.
- 4. Mine the gold:** You bring out the best in yourself and others.
- 5. Strive for balance:** You are vital and energetic as a result of a balanced life.
- 6. Remember Rule #6:** Don’t take yourself too seriously.



Modern Postcard employee Albert Misleng adds sheets of postcards to be cut to size Tuesday at the Carlsbad direct-mail advertising company.

Modern Marvel: Carlsbad company is productive, yet has fun

By: ANDREW PHELPS - For the North County Times

CARLSBAD — Here are some ideas for boosting the bottom line: Give away hordes of cash to employees, try to calm productivity, and plan lots of company parties.

It seems to work for Modern Postcard, a Carlsbad company that designs and prints 5 million pieces of direct-mail advertising every month — so much mail that two letter carriers keep an office there. Modern Postcard’s clients include real-estate agents, artists and politicians who promote themselves by going straight to consumer mailboxes.

Mostly 20- to 30-somethings are the pulse of Modern Postcard, and their workplace values aren’t the same as

those of their parents. Gen-Xers watched the baby boomers burn out after too many long hours of company loyalty.

“Generations X and Y are much wiser now,” said Sandy Asch, principal of Alliance for Organizational Excellence in Carmel Valley. “People are less willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of the organization.”

Modern Postcard hired Asch to help shake up corporate conventions for the new generation of workers.

“People have a gazillion tasks to perform every day,” Asch said. “The pace is relentless, and the demands are extra. People get very caught up in what they have to do, and there’s no more doing left.”

Asch introduced her “Six Principles of Organizational Excellence,” which builds the company’s fun, familylike environment, and promotes personal accountability and productive, not destructive, communication.

“We have fun on a daily basis,” said Sarai Rodgers, director of human resources.

Earlier this month, the company celebrated the most profitable quarter in its 18-year history. The company expects to gross about \$30 million in fiscal year 2005.

“We did something that most companies never in life would do,” Rodgers said.

“We had happy hour at work ---- after work. We figured it was innocent enough to have a few glasses of wine.”

And every one of the 220 employees, from the forklift operators to the graphics designers, got a \$50 gas card.

“Cash is huge at Modern Postcard,” Rodgers said. Each manager has a budget to reward productive employees with cash surprises: \$5 here, \$20 there.

Employees receive merit-based pay sprinkled with bonuses.

Rodgers said the company’s values of fun have been around since the beginning.

CEO Steve Hoffman co-founded The Iris Group, now the holding company for Modern Postcard, in 1978. Before then, he had only worked two jobs. The first was at a camera store during high school.

“I loved photography and I loved what I did, but I didn’t love my employer so much,” Hoffman said.

The other job was in a very un-fun hospital food service operation, where he was a dishwasher. But Hoffman said he worked with truly memorable people. “I actually liked working at that job better than the one where I did what I really loved.”

Hoffman rolled up those two principles — work he loved and people he loved — into his new company, and has maintained them ever since.

He recalled an infamous water-balloon fight, in which he teamed up with Vice President Jim Toya-Brown against all the employees. “We knew we’d get slaughtered,” Hoffman said.

“Everyone thought it was really funny until we had Super Soakers stashed in the trash cans. It almost caused a stampede.”

There are ping-pong tables and candy-colored iMacs in the ocean-view lunch room.

There are monthly, instead of yearly, company gatherings. There are also informal surfing clubs, weekend softball teams and Mammoth Mountain ski groups. “Besides the normal, spontaneous parties that happen, we’re very involved in sports,” Hoffman said.

But Modern Postcard’s newfangled approach to staff morale is not all fun and games.

The first of Sandy Asch’s principles is “Use your word wisely.” It encourages staff to avoid what she calls “downward-spiral conversations.”

“Let’s not have this conversation for the 20th time, because all we’re doing is complaining. Let’s talk about how we’re going to resolve that,” Asch said. “No excuses, no finger-pointing, no blaming, no sitting around.”

Companywide workshops teach the employees a common language for spotting and exterminating the negative talk. Everyone, including top execs, must attend together.

Asch is a native of South Africa who has managed five-star hotels internationally. She has worked to help businesses clarify their day-to-day tactics for 16 years, developing many of her principles while consulting for Qualcomm.

Asch’s advice may be paying off for

Modern Postcard. The company recently won two prestigious awards for workplace excellence from the San Diego Society for Human Resource Management. The nominees were selected by their own employees.

In the noisy press room recently, the air was saturated with the smell of ink. A peculiar, electronic rendition of “The Itsy Bitsy Spider” cut through the mechanical din of printers spewing thousands of press sheets.

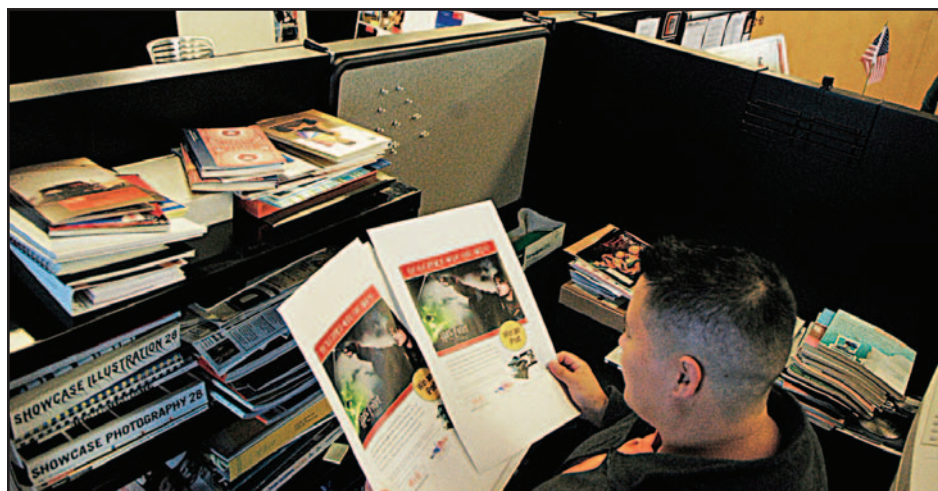
The state-of-the-art digital printers play cute tunes to alert workers of their status.

Rodgers showed off a more advanced feature of the printers, which she says is changing the industry. A ream of seemingly identical printouts actually contained postcards personalized for each recipient. By abandoning the convention of bulk, carbon-copy printing, Rodgers said, Modern Postcard’s clients are changing the way they advertise by going “one-to-one.” That’s what makes the postcards modern.

The company uses its own technology to print letters of praise for thriving employees of different departments.

“My philosophy has always been to treat ... people with profound respect, give them a tremendous amount of responsibility and authority to do their job, and then try to stay out of the way,” Hoffman said. “I’ve always been blown away by how competent and effective people are if you do that.”

Contact freelance writer Andrew Phelps at ap@andrewphelps.com.



Modern Postcard writer Desiree Jeffrey proofreads at work Tuesday at the Carlsbad direct-mail advertising company.