

FROM THE TRENCHES | BY MYRNA SISLEN

The New-Idea Contest

A few months ago, I realized I didn't have any more ideas — not just good or great ideas, but any ideas at all. So, I turned to my employees and hosted a new-idea contest.

The goal of the contest was to have my employees come up with ideas to bring new customers into the store. If the contest worked, it would create a stash of ideas that could be implemented during the coming year. I didn't want it to be about selling — just bringing new customers into the store.



And what was the best way to motivate my employees to participate? Pay them. The rules were as follows: Each participating employee had to submit two ideas each week for four weeks. I would select the best idea or ideas each week, and the winner or winners would receive \$25 cash. At the end of the month, everyone would vote, and the grand prize of \$100 cash would be awarded to the winner. Also, the person with the winning idea would be in charge of implementing his or her idea.

And what did that net me? Five of my employees participated in the contest. Five times two times four weeks equals 40 — count 'em — 40 new ideas!

But even better than the ideas — and they were pretty terrific — was my employees' enthusiasm as they participated in the project. Creative juices started flowing, which meant that every idea presented was well-conceived and serious. It was a wonderful thing for me to watch, and it really surprised me to see how invested they were in the project.

Here are the 10 winning ideas:

1. Have a featured Middle C Music Student of the Month video for YouTube, Facebook and our website.
2. Start a Middle C Music blog with product reviews.
3. Add test-drive videos of instruments to our website.
4. Make the website a priority by having a dedicated day and time for updates at least once a week.
5. Set up a YouTube channel, linked to our Facebook page, website and other social media.

6. Actually maintain our social network presence. Get Yelp reviews by giving every customer a reminder flier when they make a purchase.

7. Create a Middle C Music discount card for employees to give out at clubs they frequent.

8. Host a Middle C Music open mic night once a month.

9. Offer a monthly uke-a-long — a ukulele group lesson and jam session.

10. Hold a guitar or violin string-changing class that's open to the public.

The grand prize, by unanimous vote, was to have a regular Middle C Music open mic night once a month and invite the public. The open mics have since been ongoing and have attracted players from all over the city. In the ensuing months, we have worked to implement the other ideas, especially the ones involving our website, Facebook page, Yelp and YouTube.

When it came time to award the grand prize, and after much thought, I couldn't give it to just one person. They all worked hard, so I gave each participant a \$100 bonus. It turned out to be the best money I ever spent, and in the end, admitting that I had no new ideas turned out to be one of the best ideas I have ever had. **MI**

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Turn to your staff for help when your idea well runs dry