



Targeting HR initiatives at JD Williams



About JD Williams:

Founded in 1875, JD Williams is the UK's most successful direct home shopping company. With four sites in and around Manchester, it provides clothing, footwear, household and electrical goods, through catalogues and via the internet, to over 2 million customers.

www.jdwilliams.co.uk

JD Williams, the internet and catalogue home shopping retailer, has been able to target its HR initiatives on the factors that drive employee engagement, after achieving a high response rate of 68 per cent in an online employee survey.

Customised and administered by TalentDrain, the survey generated 'independent and irrefutable' evidence of what's important to employees and how satisfied they are at work. As a result, JD Williams has introduced a new employee profit share initiative, a new learning portal and tailored training & development courses as well as new communication processes and a new performance review process. Action plans for employee engagement are now in place for each division, which will ultimately result in greater customer satisfaction.

An employee survey is a means to an end. The end is to understand what the issues are in the organisation - and what actions you're going to take to address them.

Having run an all-staff survey in 2001 - and mini surveys in its IT, merchandising, marketing and HR teams and in its contact centre and its warehouse distribution centre - JD Williams wanted to gain a fuller picture of what employees across its four sites think about the business and where its HR effort needs to be focused.

"We believe in the value of surveys but there's no point in doing them for your own curiosity or simply to justify whatever you want justified," said Steve Smith, Head of Group HR at JD Williams. "You've got to act on the feedback from employees."

JD Williams has 2,700 staff. Its parent company N Brown Group also wanted to survey employees in its three other subsidiaries: House of Bath (gift catalogue), Gray & Osbourn (catalogue retailer) and Oxendales (Dublin-based ladies' clothes catalogue).



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“These companies have recently been added to the Group and we wanted to know how well they’d been integrated into the business,” said Steve Smith.

From a shortlist of three providers, TalentDrain was appointed to run the engagement survey.

“TalentDrain had a fundamentally better product and they were significantly keener to customise it to meet our needs,” said Carlos Flowerday, Communications Manager at JD Williams. *“Other providers merely offered to add questions to their stock questionnaire but TalentDrain took a much more participative role. They worked closely with the stakeholders and directors of each business unit, explaining the objectives and involving them in the design of the survey. We were impressed at their dedication to do the job properly.”*

The response

The resultant online questionnaire was completed by 68 per cent of staff. *“This was an impressive return as two-thirds of our employees don’t have direct access to a computer at their desks,”* said Steve Smith.

TalentDrain’s survey uncovered what is important to employees, how satisfied they are with various aspects of their work, what they like about the organisation and what they’d like to see improved. It revealed that 83% of staff are satisfied with JD Williams as

an organisation, 78% are satisfied with their job and 72% believe the expectations of the job had been met.

“It was good to see that we’re not over-selling jobs,” said Steve Smith. *“We also found that most people have a good relationship with their manager and they feel confident about the future success of the organisation.”*

The survey also uncovered some cultural differences between the four sites. *“With a head office function, a contact centre and our distribution depot, we have substantially different businesses. The survey raised some interesting disparities between the sites, as well as some revealing demographical details on the age, ethnicity and education of our workforce,”* said Carlos Flowerday.

Resultant changes

After discovering that salary and rewards, career progression and personal growth were the areas where its employees felt ‘least satisfied’, JD Williams has implemented new initiatives, including an employee profit share scheme for over 2,000 lower-grade staff.



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“Our managers were relatively happy with their salary and rewards but the bulk of our employees in the call centre and warehouse, who don’t get bonuses, were less happy,” said Steve Smith. “Now they too can share in the company’s profits.”

Carlos Flowerday adds: *“It was incredibly useful to find out that it wasn’t so much the absolute amount of money that people were dissatisfied with, it was the fact that they didn’t feel they were being rewarded for their contribution. People were putting in the effort to make the company successful but they didn’t feel thanked enough for that. This scheme is just one example of how the survey has enabled us to specifically target an improvement at exactly the right people.”*

To help address the issues of career progression and personal growth, JD Williams has changed its communication processes to better explain its grade structure and the skills and competences that are required for different grades. It has also introduced a learning portal, offering tailored training & development courses for staff.

“We’re helping people to understand what they need to do to progress their career,” said Carlos Flowerday. “We’re empowering them to create their own career paths and to plug their skills gaps.”

JD Williams has also changed its performance review process, creating objectives for each employee that relate to the company’s values.

Action plans resulting from the survey are now in place in each division. In the warehouse, for example, a group of shop floor workers and managers meet monthly to implement actions resulting from the survey responses. *“They work through the data and the written comments looking at what can be done to improve the areas that employees have told us are particularly important,”* said Carlos Flowerday. *“There have been some straightforward, ‘low-hanging fruit’ aspects that they’ve been able to rectify quickly and they’re also working on longer-term issues.”*

Presenting the information

TalentDrain made separate presentations of the results and the implications to the board of directors at JD Williams and to 40 senior managers, the HR team and the three subsidiary companies of N Brown Group.

“The survey gave us some fantastic information which has proved invaluable,” said Steve Smith. *“It is independent and irrefutable evidence of what people want from the organisation and it gives us a very powerful business case because we know this is how people feel in the company.”*



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We've also been delighted with TalentDrain, their expertise, their responsiveness and their willingness to create custom reports comparing populations of employees in different divisions and departments. It's unusual when dealing with a supplier to have your expectations met and exceeded by such a margin."

JD Williams now plans to run the employee engagement survey every two years, to develop trend data and to track engagement levels.

"We offer niche products for niche customers," said Steve Smith. "Our sales and profitability depend on us being able to keep our customers coming back and we firmly believe there's a link between employee satisfaction and customer satisfaction. Conducting this survey has helped us to make improvements for our employees. That means they'll be happier at work and they'll put more effort into their jobs and that can only be good news for our customers."

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