

Human Capital

An Interview with Maureen Paradine,
Senior Vice President-Human Resources, 1-800-FLOWERS.COM, Inc.

EDITORS' NOTE Maureen Paradine has held her current post since July of 2005. Prior to this, she was Vice President, Human Resources for The Hain Celestial Group; Director, Corporate Human Resources for Thomson Industries, Inc.; Director, Firm Development for Cooper & Dunham LLP; and Analyst for Klein Behavioral Science Consultants. She received her B.A. in Business/Psychology from Hofstra University and her Master's in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from NYU.



Maureen Paradine

COMPANY BRIEF 1-800-FLOWERS.COM, Inc., based in Carle Place, New York, is now one of the most recognized brands in gift retailing providing flowers, plants, gourmet food gifts, chocolates, gift baskets, balloons, and more to customers around the world via the Internet (1800flowers.com), telephone, retail, and franchise stores, and a network of franchise and independent professional florists. The company's family of brands are among the best known in gifting, including 1-800-Flowers.com, Fannie May Fine Chocolates, The Popcorn Factory, Cheryl's Cookies, FruitBouquets.com, Harry & David, and 1-800-Baskets.com.

Would you talk about how your role has evolved and is your role now a part of business strategy and engaged in the actual business?

It has changed quite a bit. Years ago, HR was the personnel department and it was a very transaction-oriented function. People thought of the personnel department as the place to go to fill out benefit forms or change their address.

Over the past several years, HR has evolved to become a strategic partner to the business leaders. Today, the HR function works to support and understand the strategic priorities of all of the different businesses and to make sure that, from a human capital standpoint, they're ready and well-positioned to achieve the goals they have set out to achieve.

How critical is engagement from the CEO and from the management team, as well as having a seat at the table when it comes to supporting strategy?

It's very important because success comes from the whole team, and engagement of both the leaders and the employees is really important. We want employees to be engaged, to care, and to be truly passionate about the company, the business, and what they do.

We're a very customer-oriented business and we want to make sure that our employees have that same focus. When they're dealing with a customer, the customer needs to feel they're the number-one priority and to feel good about their interaction with the company.

We really stress employee engagement. It's something we talk about and proactively ensure our employees are engaged in. We have a very entrepreneurial company and culture so our employees work hard to meet high expectations, but we also want them to have fun here.

What investment in ongoing training is necessary and, when you're dealing in service, how can you make sure you have consistent service standards and measure customer satisfaction?

Technology is so important in employee engagement and training. As a geographically dispersed company, we need to make sure we can always be in contact with our employees and engage them in training.

We do much of our training through different online modules; we do webinars and hang-outs because we want to include our remote employees also.

We also use technology to make sure our employees are aware of the successes we're having across the enterprise.

As the company has grown, how do you make sure culture doesn't get lost?

We put a big focus on culture. It's something we all own and we make sure that our people understand that. As a team, we understand the different businesses, and make sure we're always working to engineer a positive, productive, and proactive culture. We work to understand the differences among our businesses and what has led to the success of our various brands, and make sure we maintain that strong culture.

When we interview people, we also make sure that they understand we're an entrepreneurial business.

How critical is it today that a workforce mirrors the diversity of your customer base?

We make sure our recruiting methods attract diverse candidates because there are many benefits to a diverse workforce: it increases our creativity and productivity, and our language skills, and even the perception of us as an employer.

We want to make sure our employees feel proud to work with us.

How can you measure employee engagement with such a geographically diverse workforce?

When we have our peak periods, like holidays for instance, we have spirit weeks that lead up to those big events because our employees are working long hours during those times to deliver smiles to our customers.

Each location is responsible for putting together a spirit week, so when we're approaching Mother's Day, for instance, employees might have to bring a picture in of their mom and put it on a spirit board, and we have contests to guess whose mom it is with prizes for the winners.

We do the same thing for Valentine's Day and December holidays and our employees look forward to these.

How critical is it in attracting top talent to have that philanthropic focus?

Very important. We have a lot of questions from future employees asking if we have things like recycling programs.

We always make sure we do what we can to attract this top talent. A key topic for candidates now is community involvement. They want to work for employers who give back to their communities.

We started a program called Summer of a Million Smiles. During summer months, we ask our employees to go out and give back to their communities. We don't give a lot of direction or instruction because we want them to come up with different creative ideas.

Our employees form teams called Smile Squads, and they come up with ideas to help a certain cause within the community. They have supported everything from teens painting people's houses to volunteering at local animal shelters.

These Smile Squads take pictures and create storyboards to put up in our employee cafes.

What has made 1-800-FLOWERS.COM, Inc. so special for you and a place you've wanted to stay?

We make people smile and it really doesn't get better than that – coming to work every day knowing that our business is about helping people connect to the important people in their lives.

I'm so proud of the company. I've been here 11 years and have seen the company grow organically and through acquisitions. It's exciting to see all we have accomplished when I look back, and I look forward to the next several years of what we still have to accomplish. We're never satisfied with where we are – we always want to grow more. There is never a dull moment here. ●