

Gift Card Innovations

Did you know that you can get a box of pre-loaded gift cards with your company's name and logo emblazoned on them? Or that you can actually have an individual's photo placed on the card to personalize it? Or that you can purchase unique, customized "cases" for the cards to be placed in for an even more impressive presentation?

All of these innovations – and more – are available to corporations looking for a way to make a lasting impression on employees who have exceeded expectations in the workplace. "Personalizing gift cards not only makes for a nicer presentation, but it also adds even more trophy value to the gift," says Rich Killian, IGCC president.

Look near the register at your favorite retailer and you'll see gift card personalization in action. At Target, you can choose from cards that say "Happy Birthday" and "Happy Anniversary." At Wal-Mart, you can ask for cards to include a small photo of yourself and/or your family. At Barnes & Noble Booksellers, you can purchase pop-up greeting cards or a small box of Godiva chocolates that's designed to hold a gift card.

And the list goes on to include customization and personalization strategies targeted at companies that are using gift cards for incentive and motivation programs. "We're seeing companies that want to take a gift card from a retailer and co-brand it with their own corporate logo," says Cindy Mielke, IGCC's executive vice president. "We see that as a very effective way to 'brand' a corporate incentive so that it keeps on giving, even after it's been spent."

Gift card manufacturers have stepped up to the plate to answer that call, and are coming up with new innovations all the time, says Mielke. Photographs are just one unique twist, as are the many different types of cards being offered by retailers (pink ones for women, and blue ones for men, is just one example). Card shapes are also morphing to include different varieties, as are card add-ons (like a blinking Rudolph nose and a card that holds voice recordings).

"Walk into a Target or Starbucks and you'll see good examples of gift card customization in action," says Nancy Serrato, IGCC board member and former president. "They lead the pack, especially around the holidays, when it comes to creating and presenting gift cards in an unusual, attractive way."

When it comes to gift card innovations, both Mielke and Serrato say, "you ain't seen nothing yet." Retailers are already incorporating media like voice recordings into their lineups, and are looking to take things a step further by coming up with renditions that double as CD-ROMs, allowing users to pop them into their computers and use them as much more than just gift cards.

"The CD-ROM will lead the recipient into an interactive space, or perhaps an area of exclusive online content or special offer," says Serrato. "There are just so many applications and options available that we really see this as the 'next wave' in gift cards."

