

Extreme Sports Powers Mystery Shoppers

Welcome to *Workplaces*, a new quarterly feature looking at creative approaches to setting up work environments.

A Southern California “old-time surfer dude.” A fixed-wing and helicopter pilot. A sky-diving, mountain-climbing and white-water-rafting CEO who has patterned his company’s Northern California headquarters after his own extreme-sports aura.

That’s Matt Wozniak of National Shopping Service.

Wozniak, a self-described 44-year-old “old guy,” directs about 165,000 trained shoppers to about 30,000 businesses each month to collect information that is used to monitor, influence and reward employee behavior.

Inside his 5,000-square-foot-plus, warehouse-themed headquarters is an in-house workforce of 45, who have an average age of 27.

The company, in existence for 33 years, moved into these offices in Rocklin, Calif., about 75 miles from Lake Tahoe, Nev., from an office near the Los Angeles airport about five years ago.

There’s a surfboard in Wozniak’s office and skateboards in other employees’ offices. Snowshoes—once used by Wozniak to hike the state’s Big Bear area during winter—sit in a hallway corner. Posters of employees enjoying athletic feats adorn the walls, with individual taglines such as Excellence, Services and Fortitude.

“When it came time to expand our offices ... frankly, I wanted something that nobody had ever seen before,” Wozniak says. “We were looking for something to create—a fun, open environment, something different.”



Photos by Terri Ryan

A vintage 1949 Cessna 140, created from the shell of five different planes found in a junkyard, hangs from the ceiling of National Shopping Service.

The pièce de résistance is the vintage 1949 Cessna 140 hanging from the ceiling.

Wozniak put the plane together himself, using parts from five different models found in an airplane junkyard.

Using a trailer to bring the plane, minus the engine and seats, to the office, he added on the wings, installed the windows and hoisted his creation up by himself to bolt it to the ceiling.

“There’s actually not that many bolts holding it to the ceiling. That’s where the new hires go,” he jokes.

The sports motif is layered onto a warehouse concept designed by Wozniak. The workplace features fully exposed HVAC ducting, tables and trashcans made of HVAC ducting, polished bare-cement floors, steel-look cubicles—from which employees use company-supplied two-and-a-half-foot periscopes “so they can eyeball their

neighbors”—and interior walls painted with primary colors.

The sports theme even extends to company functions. Wozniak takes staff sky diving, rock climbing and white-water rafting. He also pulls together more prosaic games of baseball. At company picnics, he offers airplane rides to employees and their families in his four-passenger Piper Cherokee 180.

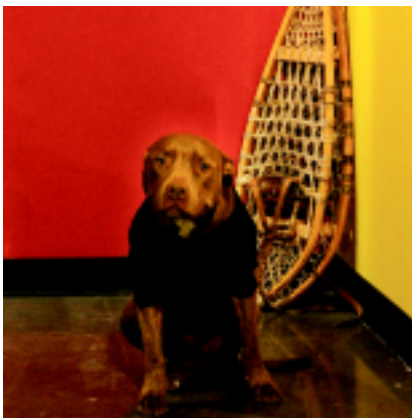
Sports offers competition and camaraderie—and that’s what Wozniak seeks to imbue in his employees: competition to best respond to client concerns and requests, to come in under budget, to make the fewest errors and so on; camaraderie to make such efforts a team effort.

At the same time, the warehouse’s high ceilings offer a feeling of freedom, and that’s also part of the culture. There’s no dress code. No hierarchical restrictions on discussing ideas on policies and procedures. No stuffiness.

The looseness stretches to job titles as well. Wozniak had to call his director of operations, Nerrissa Coleman, who also “wears the HR hat,” to get her exact title. Policies are set by a business team including Coleman; the company’s vice president, Tony Yorba, and Wozniak.

“I think people do feel energized and entrepreneurial in this environment, and I want to push our corporate philosophy of ‘value added’ and ‘always give a little bit extra,’” he says.

Readers who would like to suggest visually interesting workplaces for this quarterly feature should send the information to afreedman@lrp.com. Send other questions or comments about this feature to hreletter@lrp.com.



Cheech, who is wearing a Harley Davidson T-shirt, is a daily visitor to the office, brought there by Aaron Knecht, the director of technology. Here, he poses with some snowshoes worn by Wozniak for wintertime hiking in the state’s Big Bear area.



Some employees display little shopping carts, which are part of the company’s logo, from cubicles fashioned to look like “steel” in keeping with the warehouse theme of the offices.



CEO Matt Wozniak stands in his office between symbols of two of his favorite activities: a surfboard and an airplane propeller.