

Business integrity honored / Five local companies receive Torch Awards for marketplace ethics

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Treat the customer right, and do what you say you're going to do.

Those may be platitudes, but that's what good business comes down to for the local winners of this year's Torch Awards, which honor marketplace integrity.

"I'd rather give the profit up and keep the customer," said Ronnie Adolf, owner of Adolf Jewelers. The company was founded by his parents, Kurt and Jean, who passed along their sense of business integrity, Adolf said.

"In the big picture, if we do things to make our customers happy that are not in our favor, the customer will return," he said. "Over a period of years, we will recover what we have lost."

Adolf Jewelers is one of five companies that won Torch Awards, which are given by the Better Business Bureau of Central Virginia. The winners are eligible for the International Torch Award, which is presented by the Council of Better Business Bureaus.

For companies with more than 500 employees, the local award went to SunTrust Banks and SunTrust Mortgage Inc., which submitted a joint entry. The winners among smaller companies were Rainbow Station, Holiday Barn Pet Resorts, and Adolf Jewelers.

"All of these companies demonstrated clear attention to detail in dealing with their associates and customers and competitors, and they really focus on doing what they say they are going to do," said Tom Gallagher, president and chief executive officer of the central Virginia bureau.

The winners were selected by a panel of judges based on criteria that included ethics in buying and selling, honesty in advertising, marketing and communications, and employee-training programs to aid in carrying out ethical practices.

"To be recognized for building a big-money business is one thing, but to be recognized for your ethics in the community is life-giving for a business," said Emerson Hughes, who founded Holiday Barn Pet Resorts in 1972. The company operates two pet boarding houses and spas in the Richmond area.

"The real reason we won the award is because of the high ethical standards of our staff," Hughes said. The company's staff of up to 150 people seasonally includes a large number of students in part-time jobs, and Hughes said the company's management team considers it a responsibility to help teach them ethical practices.

Gail Johnson is a pediatric nurse who founded winner Rainbow Station in 1989. "For our parents, we promise an experience for their children, and we deliver that experience. You can count on the fact that if your child is here, then we are going to do what we say we are going to do."

The company operates three private pre-school and after-school recreation facilities in the Richmond area, which have on-site pediatric nurses for children with mild health problems. It also has sold 15 franchise locations.

The top executives for SunTrust Central Virginia and SunTrust Mortgage also attributed the award to their employees. Together, the companies employ 3,644 people in the region.

"Both the bank and the mortgage corporation were built on honesty and doing what is right for our clients. And we are especially proud of our associates who support our mission," said Dale Cannady, SunTrust Banks' regional president and chief executive officer.

"A key goal for us at SunTrust Mortgage is to create an experience that is so positive that customers refer us and return to us. That's how we plan to grow," said Sterling Edmunds, SunTrust Mortgage's president and chief executive officer.

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