



BY JOHN SHARE
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The high-energy sales staff at First Financial USA (FFUSA) can sometimes get a little too loud and boisterous for their more reflective colleagues in tech support. So when the Medina-based company remodeled its offices, management took employee feedback to heart — building walls and providing work stations that gave techies the peace and quiet they wanted.

"They want to keep employees happy; they're just very accommodating," said Heather Pitts, a tech support employee.

FFUSA provides credit-card processing services for merchants. It has about 20 employees at its headquarters and 200 sales representatives — including many independent contractors — across the country. John Eliason, CEO and co-founder, said frequent and open communication between management and employees fuels innovation and fosters a flexible, supportive work environment.

FFUSA provides employees many opportunities to interact with each other. On the first Thursday of each month, the staff meets in person and by conference call to review accomplishments and discuss plans. Each department holds weekly meetings, frequently bringing in offsite personnel. And Eliason frequently touches base with individual employees.

He "does a lot of observing and asking questions, which is very refreshing," said Heidi Steffens, who serves as marketing manager among other roles. "[Eliason] wants to hear what we think, takes his knowledge of the industry, and puts those two things together."

Steffens recalls meeting with Eliason on a weekly basis when she started with the company four years ago as a part-time recruiter. They'd have sit-down meetings to discuss Steffens' observations of and ideas for improving the recruiting function. With feedback from Steffens and others, the company has more than doubled the number of recruiters and the number of employees it hires each week. Eliason notes employees' strengths and interests, and he sometimes moves them to other areas to capitalize on their talents. That's how Steffens wound up exercising her creative abilities in marketing.

Some of the best ideas come from employees, Eliason said. He regularly asks employees to put on "extra-extra-large thinking caps" to address various issues such as simplifying operations. For example, the company used to experience a jammed fax machine and lost faxes until it implemented an employee's

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Tim Severson
Recruiting manager

First Financial USA Ltd.

FIRST-TIME WINNER

Score: **96.43**

CEO and co-founder: John Eliason

Headquarters: Medina

Description: Provides credit- and debit card-based payment-processing services

Corporate Employees: 21

Web site: ffusa.net



A nice perk at First Financial USA: plentiful food at staff meetings. From left: Lilya Vayneburg, support coordinator; Zach Dietz, recruiter; and Tim Severson, recruiting manager

idea to adopt technology that enables all employees to receive faxes through their own fax numbers on their own PCs.

Eliason regularly finds himself in the thick of things, but no one accuses him of micromanagement.

"We believe in bringing good people to the table and giving them clear expectations and having good discussions and feedback, but letting them do their thing," Eliason said. "You don't have to invest your time micromanaging when you've got great people."

Employees say the company is generous with salaries and bonuses, as well as vari-

ous perks. Extras range from plentiful food at meetings to holiday parties to the foosball table at the corporate office. They especially appreciate the flexible, family-friendly environment, including a laptop they can check out if they need to work away from the office to take care of a sick child or other personal business.

The company strives to help employees maintain a balanced lifestyle by giving them the flexibility they need to manage their lives and trusting they'll do their jobs, Eliason said. "People could take advantage of that, but I don't think that they do."

Tim Severson joined FFUSA in 2007 as a recruiter hiring outside sales agents, his first job out of college. He was attracted to the growing credit-card industry, and to a smaller company where he could get to know people.

"It's been a great place to learn the corporate world. I get a lot of great support from management," Severson said. He credits Eliason and Chuck Fowler, vice president of sales, with providing a lot of feedback on what he's doing well and how to get better. First Financial USA offers "a lot of positive growth," he said.

John Share is a freelance writer.