



## Erin Brereton

[Labor & Staffing](#), [Business Advice](#)

# Slicing into the Talent Pool

Reality and competition television shows like “Cake Boss,” “Cupcake Wars” and “The Great British Bake Off” have sparked mainstream interest in cake decorating, yet the hype hasn’t resulted in an influx of qualified cake decorators.

“There are a lot more people out there trying to do it, but it’s very hard to find talented decorators,” says Kimberley Holleman, director of bakery for the 60-store **Fiesta Mart** grocery chain located throughout Texas.

The cake decorating industry experiences a fair amount of turnover, says Kathy Scott, CMSA, chairman of the board of the **International Cake Exploration Societe**. “It’s hard to find good people who will stay with you,” says Scott, who also owns **Sweet Expressions Bakery** in Abbeville, South Carolina.

Being a decorator at an in-store bakery isn’t easy. The job takes creativity, the ability to work in a high-volume environment and, in some cases, a willingness to complete repetitive tasks. Grocery stores, which, according to the **Bureau of Labor Statistics**, employ 26 percent of all bakers in the U.S., often require decorators to work early mornings, late evenings, weekends and holiday shifts.

But a willingness to work outside of typical business hours is rarely the most important quality in-store bakeries seek in potential hires.

*“We require a very high skill set and attention to detail. In addition, regardless of experience level, all our associates need to have the passion for service.”*

*—Maria Brous, director of media and community relations at supermarket chain Publix*

“We require a very high skill set and attention to detail,” says Maria Brous, director of media and community relations at supermarket chain **Publix**, which has more than 1,100 locations in six states. “In addition, regardless of experience level, all our associates need to have the passion for service.”

Faced with a small supply of qualified candidates, as well as competition from other grocery stores and local bakeries, how can managers attract and retain the crème de la crème in cake decorating?

### Take Advantage of Being Big

While a manager’s first instinct may be to use external hiring platforms like online job boards, **looking just across the aisle** to other departments or store locations can save time and resources. In-store bakeries often have large internal networks to tap.

At Publix, internal hires who are familiar with company procedures and standards are often a great option because they’re already a guaranteed cultural fit.

“In almost all cases, our decorators have held other positions within our bakeries,” Brous says. “We find that while we may hire associates who have cake decorating experience at other retailers or smaller independents, they still need to be onboarded as a decorator apprentice for Publix first.”

This onboarding process involves working alongside experienced associates until they master a specific skill. Once they have, they move onto the next skill.

“We’ll teach our associates everything from icing a cake all the way through making a wedding cake,” Brous says. “Each associate will need to perform each identified task prior to completing decorator training.”

In addition to an established network of diverse skill sets, another advantage supermarket chains have over bakeries and smaller stores is the ability to offer competitive compensation, as many retail chains can pay more than privately owned businesses. Managers may also be able to sell candidates on benefits packages, Fiesta Market’s Holleman says.

Publix employees receive stock in the company—part of the grocery chain’s renowned focus on workplace culture and overall philosophy, says Brous, which undoubtedly helps entice jobseekers. “Our associates have skin in the game,” she says.

### Hire—and Keep—Power Players

Hiring skilled decorators is just step one. Those who do great work can be as hard to keep as they are to come by, Holleman says. “They almost have a job for life. People are always going to eat and celebrate. It’s a good business to be in.”

So how do you keep top decorators?

**Be transparent about the schedule:** Cake decorating isn’t usually a 9-to-5 job, and candidates should know that from the get-go. In addition to discussing standard shift schedules with potential hires, managers may want to explain how holidays or seasonality affect working hours and duties.

**Sell them on career growth:** In addition to more competitive wages and benefits, in-store bakeries may be able to offer the opportunity to hone more skills through training that will ultimately grow bakers’ careers.

**Give them room to experiment:** “Most decorators thrive on being able to show their skills,” Scott says. “They need some creative freedom.”

Grocery stores can take a page from artisanal bakeries to ensure they’re offering the same creative opportunities. For example, at **Wild Flour Bakery** in Rocky River, Ohio, creativity goes hand-in-hand with customer service, as decorators get to work directly with visitors to create cakes they’re both excited about.

“The cakes are custom-designed,” says owner Sue Johansen. “Almost all involve things like customers bringing in invitations, the outfit their kid will be wearing—one lady stripped down wallpaper and brought it in. We have guidelines, but the decorator has a lot of creative freedom.”

**Pat them on the back:** Another tip grocery stores can pull from bakeries, if they don’t do this already, is incorporating positive recognition into everyday operations. At **Creative Cakes Bakery & Cafe** in Tinley Park, Illinois, employees document positive customer responses on a form that’s then shared during staff production meetings. “Cake decorators are people pleasers, but if a customer comes to pick up a cake and bursts into tears of happiness, the decorator may never hear about it,” says co-owner Beth Fahey, who’s also the president of the **Retail Bakers of America**.

Bakers and decorators have a unique opportunity to be part of customers’ most memorable celebrations, says Brous, and they should be recognized for it. “Our decorators work extremely hard to create lasting memories.”

## YOU’LL LOVE THESE ARTICLES TOO



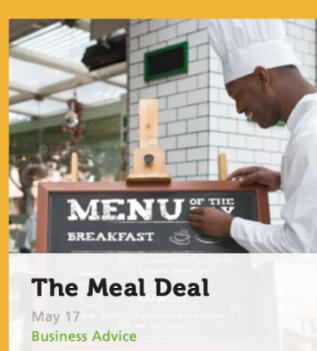
### Treasure Teams: How to Retain Supermarket Bakery Talent

Aug 31  
[Business Advice](#)



### The Next Frontier in Restaurant Talent Management

Oct 2  
[Business Advice](#)



### The Meal Deal

May 17  
[Business Advice](#)