



# MOST VALUABLE ASSETS

Despite the economy, landscape companies aren't taking their employees for granted. BY **BETH GERACI** SENIOR EDITOR

**W**ith landscape companies struggling in recent years, some workers have lost their jobs. But that doesn't mean Green Industry business owners don't value their employees.

They do. In fact, some executives fight just as hard to keep them as they do to recruit them.

The Mickman Brothers landscape division is having a record year, says Mickman Brothers Inc. President and Chief Executive Officer John Mickman. He attributes that success to the fact that the company has garnered many high-end residential projects in 2011, often to the tune of \$40,000. The largest landscape job Mickman workers completed this year was a \$300,000 residential job.

Large-scale jobs like those — as well as smaller jobs — require a dedicated, knowledgeable staff and crew, Mickman says. But motivating and nurturing employees takes work. That's why Mickman Brothers goes to great lengths to train its employees intensively, promote them from within and reward them for jobs well done.

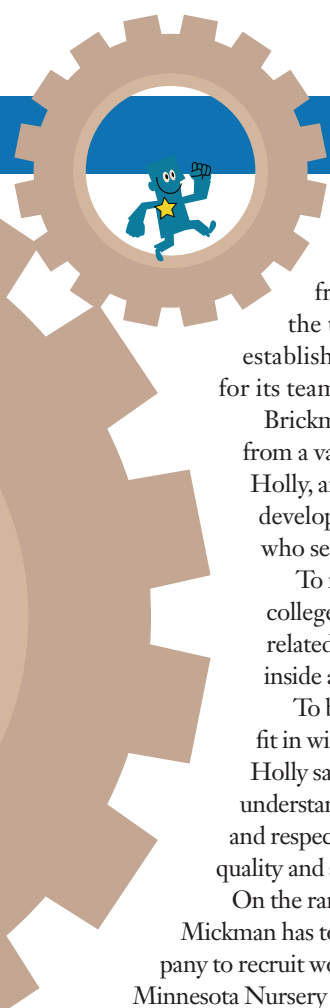
This year, Ham Lake, MN-based Mickman Brothers hired three foremen from outside the company, a rarity. "We always hesitate to hire from the outside for that type of position, but we've been so busy we didn't have anybody to move up through those ranks," Mickman says.

"I try not to hire outside foremen, because I don't know where their training is coming from," Mickman says. At his company, foremen are trained for at least two years. If they are hired from outside the company, he requires them to have five years of experience.

Over at Gaithersburg, MD-based Brickman Group, company managers work hard to promote from within. "Promoting from within is a cornerstone of our employment strategy," says Brickman Communications Manager Margie Holly.

Brickman is home to 10,590 employees, 8,055 of which are hourly and 2,535 of which are full-time staff. The company has a formal process to enable employees to take advantage of advancement opportunities, Holly says.

"The team member and manager together identify the employee's goals for professional growth, and what training they need to prepare for advancement," she says. The company offers training in both operational techniques and standard professional skills, such as communication and leadership.



Covering everything from sales to management, the training at Brickman establishes a strong foundation for its team members, Holly says.

Brickman also “recruits talent from a variety of sources,” says Holly, and has a staff of employee development and recruiting pros who seek talent nationwide.

To recruit, Brickman looks to colleges offering horticultural-related degrees and seeks both inside and outside talent.

To be hired, a candidate must fit in with the company culture, Holly says. That means they should understand the value of teamwork and respect and be passionate about quality and service.

On the rare occasions when John Mickman has to venture outside the company to recruit workers, he advertises on the Minnesota Nursery and Landscape Association Web site. In fact, Mickman found most of his outside workers from that Web site, he says.

To retain employees, Mickman strives to treat his employees well. That means paying them at or above market rate, hosting seasonal company parties at his home, and acknowledging his employees at awards banquets. To communicate openly with its workers, Mickman Brothers also shares its financials with its team at year’s end.

“As important as a paycheck is for everybody, I really feel that anybody’s employees need to feel like they’re a necessary part of the company, and we try to acknowledge their importance.”

He acknowledges their importance by reminding himself that Mickman Brothers is “not these buildings. Our company is our people, and every single one of them is important.” Apparently, Mickman employees appreciate that philosophy, because they stick around a while. Although there is regular turnover in landscape laborers, Mickman’s key personnel often stay on for 10 years or more.

It’s the same at Brickman, where the company has a nearly 90% retention rate for full-time employees and the team is “among the most tenured in the industry,” Holly says. Branch managers stay on for an average of nine years, regional managers 13 years and senior division

leadership for 16 years, she says. Holly attributes that longevity to Brickman’s family-like culture and tendency to foster its employees’ goals.

Brickman also openly praises its team members, both formally and informally, Holly says. “So whether it’s including them in a strategy session, a public pat on the back, or a private thank you for going above and beyond, part of our managers’ job, as leaders of their business, is to understand their team, and to motivate and appreciate them appropriately,” says Holly.

As Brickman does, Mickman Brothers motivates its employees by reviewing each one annually and helping each establish goals. “If you don’t know what’s expected of you, you may think you’re doing a good job, but you really might not be living up to the expectations of your supervisor,” Mickman says.

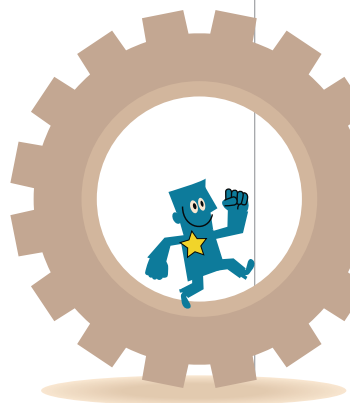
By setting goals for its workers, Mickman inspires them to meet deadlines and work efficiently. For example, the company has a job sheet for its construction division that sets daily goals for workers based on the number of hours they’re working that day.

If they go over the amount of time they estimated the job would take, the company discusses with them why it happened.

“Every single job these foremen do, they want to know how they did. They’re highly motivated to be successful,” Mickman says.

Every year at Christmastime, the entire Mickman team closes up shop and gets busy manufacturing balsam wreaths — more than half a million of them. The wreaths are sold to non-profit groups throughout the country as fundraising tools. Throughout the process, the company goes through 1,500 tons of balsam boughs. Mickman says the wreath making is valuable for many reasons, not the least of which is it inspires his team to work together toward a common goal.

Holly says she doesn’t know if there is one best way to retain employees today. But she is sure of one thing: “People stay where they feel valued, where they have opportunity to grow and challenge themselves, and where they know they are making a difference.” **LM**



John Mickman (right) with brother, business partner and company cofounder, Chris.