

*Proven ways to recruit,
retain and get along with
your workforce.*

By CARMEN ZAYAS

In my seven years as head of human resources for Clean Cut, Inc., I have seen the pendulum swing from having an excess of viable job applicants, to this year's mad scramble for employees. And, it probably is not going to get better in the near future. The following programs have helped us stay ahead of the employee crunch.

Keep in mind though that programs in and of themselves are not effective. What has made our recruiting and retention so successful is the ability of our people to implement our programs. Equally important is dedication to providing employees with the tools, resources and rewards necessary for them to grow and advance.

Recruiting

The most important aspect of successful recruiting is to have strong company loyalty among your employees, and to have

number one source of good applicants. More than 65 percent of our employees come from employee referrals. And this group enjoys the highest retention rate of any other group in our company. We pay a bonus for each referral, plus we run an overall contest. At the end of every six-month period we offer a \$1,000 bonus to the employee who has referred the most, active employees. We try to make the contest fun, we tally referrals by employee on a huge board and we refer to it during each meeting.

It's important to develop game rules up front and inform all employees. For example, articulate what qualifications applicants must have to be hired so that employees are not discouraged if some of their referrals aren't hired.

Give them the tools to recruit effectively. We print small cards in English and

Many ways to recruit the



Have company veterans serve as 'trainers' to help break in new recruits.

a reputation for excellence in your market. If you have taken the time and initiative to foster goodwill among your employees they will be your best recruiters. And if you have reputation for excellence, good employees will come looking for you.

Also keep in mind that nothing beats personal relationships. Advertising helps get the word out but it can never take the place of personal contact. We strongly encourage participation in community, social, athletic and religious organizations by all our employees. It exponentially expands your company's ability to have "personal contact."

Nine ways to recruit

1. **Your employees.** These are your

Spanish that say who we are, what we do and what positions we're looking for. We leave a small space for employees to write their names. They can then hand these cards to prospective applicants. We role-play during meetings on how to "sell" the company.

2. **Sports organizations.** Recruiting among amateur athletes has proven successful for us. Because landscaping is such a physically demanding job, people involved in sports already have a higher probability of being able to withstand hard physical labor. We will contact league reps and convince them to allow us to make a presentation at their team captain's meeting or

to have a table at their registration. At these presentations we stress the opportunities available with us. People will willingly help you spread the news about your company if they feel you are providing their members with a good opportunity.

We will make donations to the league for equipment or uniforms, sponsor a company team, or set up a table during their games and offer water bottles, koozies, etc. We do the same for softball teams, little league teams, and other events.

3. Churches / social organizations. We find many of our valued employees share characteristics of being churchgoers and/or being very involved in social organizations. We will approach churches and ask how we can help their social organizations (i.e., make a donation to their social services, hold a canned food drive for their food pantry, etc.). They will in turn put flyers

Make them feel at home. It works!

The best and most costly recruiting system will not help you retain employees once you've hired them. At Clean Cut, Inc. we are extremely proud of our retention rate and the number of long-term employees we have. To accomplish this we have stuck to the basics.

► We take time to ensure we select the right people. Post-employment physicals, drug screens, background checks, reference checks, and an evaluation by our trainer are all part of the selection process.

► We take the time to familiarize employees with our company, its standards and its values. This makes employees feel at home from day one.

► We have a lot of meetings. We try to make them fun and informative. But employees really appreciate the fact you keep them informed as to what is going on in the company. Especially one that has as many different offices as we do.

► Every maintenance employee is evaluated at time of hire. We have developed a level system where we detail each job title and the requirements of each level. After an evaluation by our trainer, employees are told what level they are currently on, and what skills/knowledge they need to acquire before they can move to the next level. Then we provide several trainers, training crews, classes, conferences and Saturday training classes to help them move towards their goals. This develops a sense of opportunity and fairness. We'll bring in property managers, chemical co. reps, experts in peripheral fields to talk to our employees. This shows them we care about their desire to add value to themselves. Plus it makes them more efficient employees. We offer free English and Spanish classes, thereby stressing that communication is important to us.

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be used to offset the need during peak seasons. We haven't worked with this program long enough to be able to recommend it wholeheartedly, but it does seem to hold promise.

5. Local schools. We partner with horticultural departments at local community colleges, local votech schools and even with high schools that have a horticultural program. We will encourage our employees to serve as mentors, or sit on advisory committee, or give presentations at these schools.

6. Temporary agencies. We have partnered with a local temporary labor agency that specializes in construction laborers. They send us a few laborers every morning at a reasonable markup rate (due to our volume). We then have the option of using these employees for a week. If any supervisor requests that a job offer be made to a specific temp, we'll make them an offer. The only requirement is that we have them on the agency's payroll for one week. Temps know the situation up front, and the temp agency offers an hourly rate just below what we offer starting employees; if they do come on board, it'll be a raise for them.

7. Radio Stations. An expensive advertising medium but if you can develop a partnership with local Spanish or bilingual stations we have had excellent results. We will

sponsor events during major events, like the World Cup Soccer Tournament. Provide concise, upbeat information in a direct manner. Too much info or too many "cutesy" ads diminish your listeners' ability to understand when, where and why you want them to apply at your company.

8. Flyers. We will pay our crew leaders or a local youth group to put out flyers at places where prospective employees shop or play--local grocery stores, Walmarts, ethnic grocery stores, sports events, or at the park. We do not generate an exceptional number

best

up in their offices, make flyers/information available to their members, and refer people seeking assistance or needing a job to us.

Refugee, legal aid, apartment assistance and other organizations will also provide these avenues to disseminate information to their clients. We have paid for outside lawyers/speakers to make presentations to the group's members and contributed to their fundraising efforts.

4. H-2B Visas. This program is gaining in popularity in our industry. We have just begun to use it this year. It requires considerable investment of time and money to navigate the system but can be a good source of legal labor from Mexico that can

of applicants but it does bring in some applicants and helps us get the word out.

9. General advertising. We round out our recruiting efforts by putting ads in the local newspapers (Spanish & English); in local trade newsletters (TAN, ALCA, TALC); posting job announcements on a year-round basis with the unemployment office, trade schools, and community colleges.

Other suggestions

Give your employee the appropriate tools. Don't scrimp on equipment or trucks. We have full-time mechanics to maintain equipment in top-notch shape. Not having the right equipment or equipment in good running condition is one of the biggest obstacles to doing high quality work in an efficient manner.

Have fun. We get a lot of excellent quality work done but we also make time for fun - employee picnics, Christmas parties, retreats, all day on-site conferences specialized for our crew leaders or keymen, contests, breakfasts. We make coming to work a fun experience. Plus we build in some surprises now and then just to keep things exciting. Acknowledge employee birthdays and anniversaries; bring in breakfast tacos on Cinco de Mayo.

Make their life as easy as possible. Landscaping, especially in the hot Texas summers is hard work. So we make what we can easier so they can concentrate on the hard part - the actual work on the properties. Have ice ready for their coolers in the morning. Make forms easy to understand and fill out. Make sure payroll checks are accurate and fix mistakes immediately. Provide lockers and cleaning service for uniforms. Ensure employees have someone they can turn to if their supervisor isn't available. My assistants and myself are all bilingual in Spanish/English, and two of us are always on duty at 6:00 a.m. and at 6:00 p.m. We're available to listen and help.

Motivation. The most important thing to remember about motivation is that it is an extremely individual concept. So get to

know your workers. Talk to them, find out what they like and appreciate. We have a lot of family-focused employees so we offer stuff for their kids - scholarships for their college-age kids; tutoring during the summer; parties for the kids.

Remember people are people. People don't have the same life circumstances, same ambitions, same experiences, or same skills. But all are people. Culture may help dictate some general characteristics, work ethic, family-focus, but treat employees as individuals. I make it my job to know what motivates Juan Bastista or Guadalupe Castro or Jason Page, not what motivates a



The author, Carmen Zayas: 'give employees respect.'

Mexican, or a Mexican-American or a Texan. This takes time and effort but it will come back. Investing time in your employees has the biggest return on investment of any business practice I know. It is those employees who will work the extra hours when labor is short, who will convince friends at other companies or other industries to come work for you.

And remember the best things in employee morale are free, really! Say thank-you, inquire about the sick child, congratulate the new father, mention who has accomplished the next level in their training, share customer compliments, listen to their thoughts, ask for their feedback.

Learn their language. If you are in an area of the country that has a lot of Hispanic employees (or Vietnamese or some other group) learn the language. You

could get into a deep philosophical debate over who should learn what; but trust me, making an attempt to communicate directly with your employees will go a long ways towards establishing loyalty. Also you will serve as a role model for them to learn English, and they will feel more comfortable practicing their English with you.

Don't give in to the constant demand for more money. A definite no-no. Once you get in that situation every employee will be demanding more and more money without regard to their skill level or contribution to your bottom line. In the various markets we are in we've experienced competitors who over-inflated wages or unlimited overtime during the summer. I've found that employee loyalty (they'll work long hours rather than support a fellow employee using extortion techniques) and a fair compensation system, and the fortitude not to take the easy way out and give in to excessive employee demands, will help you survive any situation.

Make sure management leads the way. Our managers, and oftentimes our president and owners, attend all meetings, meet with their crew leaders every day, take their crews to lunch or breakfast. In a nutshell, they do not delegate the management of their employees.

On a closing note at a recent employee meeting I asked employees to suggest and vote on what quality most separates Clean Cut from its competitors. I expected Customer Service, high standards of quality, award-winning properties, etc., to be the main suggestions (and they were among the top five). But, the quality that most differentiated Clean Cut in the employees' minds was - the family atmosphere. □

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