

Bob Kustka

Factoring Human Capital Into Your Business Plan

Boston Business Journal
June 23-29, 2006
By Keith Regan

LIKARR: Lessons learned foster a family feel

*A company founded
in a garage is now
bursting at the seams*

BY KEITH REGAN
SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Jim Greene founded **LIKARR Maintenance Systems** of Foxboro in the garage of his home in 1986. Before long, it spilled over into the basement and later he moved into a cousin's barn. Later it set up shop in a 5,200-square-foot building that has since been expanded to more than 55,000 square feet.

"Now we're starting to bulge at the seams here as well," said Greene. "But I think we're going to be here for a while."

Surely one of the reasons the firm is growing so rapidly is the way it treats its 10 employees — treatment that helped win **LIKARR** the highest ranking in the Best Places to Work 2006 Emerging Companies category.

LIKARR offers integrated maintenance systems to a variety of building owners in eastern Massachusetts and

surrounding areas, delivering custom solutions that include maintenance supplies, equipment and automated systems, consulting and training and software to help manage maintenance programs.

Greene, whose son **Rick Greene** now holds the title of company president, said his ideas about how to run **LIKARR** grew out of his own experiences. Before he founded the firm, Greene worked for a national cleaning products company, working his way up from on-the-road salesman to district manager. The experience was largely a positive one, but over time, the company he worked for changed hands once and then a second time.

"It's the old story. Commissions were being cut. I was still working harder and harder. I thought I could do just as well on my own," Greene recalls. And so he started **LIKARR**.

Greene ran the company by himself for several years before son Rick joined in 1992. Two years later another son, **Rob Greene**, also came into the fold. Today, there are 10 employees — when



Emerging
Company

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LIKARR: Working to keep its 'small family atmosphere' as it grows larger

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asked for a head count, Jim starts ticking off first names — in addition to Jim.

Asked why his employees reported such high levels of satisfaction in the Best Places to Work survey, he cites his own background.

"I know what the salespeople are up against," he said. "I've done it myself."

The sales staff has grown LIKARR, he said, "the hardest way possible: cold calling."

Greene has run LIKARR the way his former employer was run before the string of ownership changes shifted things around. "It was fair and honest and your word meant something," he said.

Rather than relying on specific programs to boost worker happiness, Greene relies on a simple formula: Offering good work — and plenty of it — and fair treatment. He also believes that offering customers the best quality products, and shifting suppliers when someone actually makes a better one, adds to the satisfaction for his sales team and the rest of the staff.

"They can say with confidence the

products we're carrying are the best available," he said.

LIKARR is poised for growth, with the company seeking to hire additional sales and administrative staff.

Bob Kustka, founder of **CHR Partners** in Norwell, a human resources consulting firm, said employee retention and satisfaction issues often become more of a challenge as businesses start to grow.

"Companies that are able to retain the culture of a small family atmosphere are fairly rare," he added. "It becomes more of a challenge, but strong cultures can survive the changes."

Greene said the variety of personalities among the employees helps keep the company growing wisely as well. His son Rick is "constantly looking four or five years down the road" with additional growth in his sights, while Jim attempts to provide a balance to that view.

"In the end, it's all down to hard work," says Greene. "We earn our money the old-fashioned way — we earn it. All the success we have is a result of the work we do for our customers. The people who come to work for us all buy into that idea."