

## The Magic of Morale

Intangibles don't appear on a line-item budget, but the human profits they generate can last for years

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By Martin Romjue

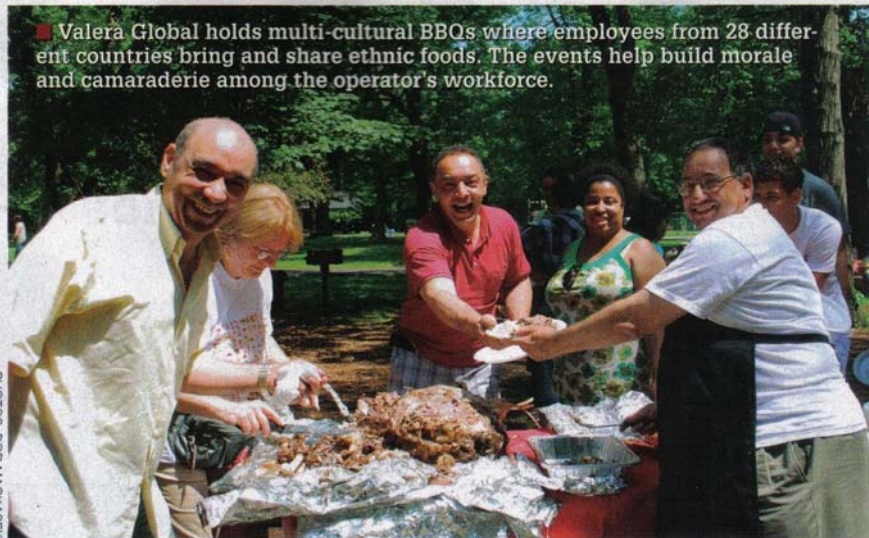
**THIS MAY BE** the traditional season of cheer, but given the job losses and nasty political scene, not necessarily one of high morale for American workers.

Operator Bob Mackasek manages to maintain both at this company, and has the results to show for it. As CEO of New York-based Valera Global, ranked No. 18 on LCT's Top 100 Fleets list, Mackasek has cobbled together a comprehensive program to keep his employees and chauffeurs engaged and motivated.

In September, Mackasek even earned the crown jewel of business exposure: Feature coverage of his employee soccer team in the Metro section of *The New York Times*. The Valera team participated in the 5th Annual New York Red Bulls Corporate Cup held Sept. 13 in Giants Stadium at the Meadowlands in New Jersey. Earlier this year, Valera Global's annual employee awards dinner was written up in the popular, chatty "Talk Of The Town" section in the *New Yorker* magazine.

Valera's employee programs include a soccer team for chauffeurs, multiple awards and recognitions, incentive programs, and employee BBQs, among other social events. The 195-vehicle company has about 90 full-time employees and 200 independent-contractor chauffeurs. Mackasek talked to LCT Magazine recently about his approach. (Answers have been abbreviated in some areas).

Valera Global holds multi-cultural BBQs where employees from 28 different countries bring and share ethnic foods. The events help build morale and camaraderie among the operator's workforce.



PHOTOS: BOB MACKASEK

**LCT:** *What kind of incentives do you offer to promote employee morale?*

**Mackasek:** The first thing we concentrate on is non-financial incentives. We find there are a number of issues that come up in what employees tend to view as important in the workplace. Compensation is rarely one of them. Communication is more important. We try to find social outlets where people can intermingle. What we do is four times per year we have barbecues, and all lunch hours for employees are extended. Chauffeurs will come in all day long.

We have an annual picnic in the summertime. The best part of it is the fact that we have 28 separate countries represented among our chauffeurs. It's a chance for all those different ethnic cultures to get together and share their experiences. That takes the form of food. Families provide large spreads of ethnic foods. We have magicians and clowns.

The one thing I noticed, aside



■ Bob Mackasek sees employee diversity as a key to success at New York-based Valera Global.

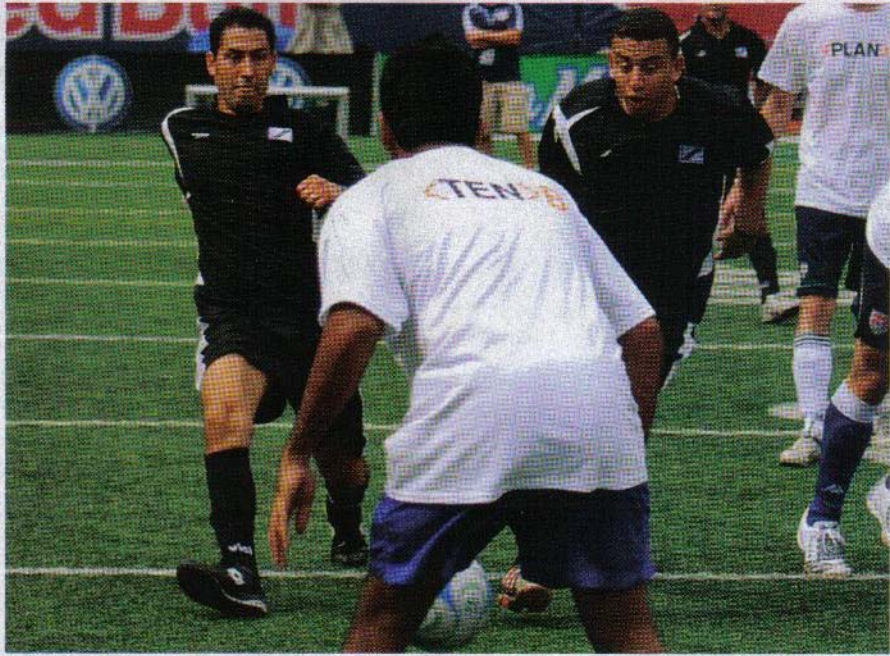
from the food which unites everyone, was a love of soccer and a passion for the game. Every year we would have a pick-up game of soccer with an ad hoc team. We decided to sponsor the team and entered them in this corporate cup from the Red Bulls. They played in a giant stadium this year. However, they didn't advance because the game occurred during Ramadan, and three-quarters of the team is Muslim. They couldn't drink water during the day and got dehydrated out of the game, so we had to replace them. We'll do much better next year since the game won't be during Ramadan.

**LCT:** *How do you handle employee awards?*

**Mackasek:** We have an annual dinner dance, which is attended by chauffeurs, employees, and their spouses and significant others. It's a formal affair with many people wearing clothes and costumes native to their countries. It's a big deal and they really look forward to it. We hold it in January when holiday season is finished. There's music, dancing, and lots of food. We couple it with the awards we give out, including financial incentive awards. If you win, you get a pair of company shirts and dinner for two

at a local restaurant. We choose best employee, best dressed, most improved, best trainer, and a number of different categories. But the most significant is our safety awards. If you go 12 months without an accident, which means no touching of another vehicle such as even kissing mirrors, you get a certain amount of money for each year. We give out about \$40,000 in cash awards at our annual dinner. We also have in-house "Sharpie Awards," where on-street quality control checkers see that chauffeurs are doing their jobs properly. Once a week, we find the person who appears the best. Then we have a customer service rewards program where individuals can get \$1 for each farm-out, and teams of customer service representatives compete with each other. That sense of camaraderie they develop, pushing or pulling along fellow teammates, makes a job more interesting.

■ **Chauffeurs at Valera Global belong to a company-sponsored soccer team that recently participated in a major regional corporate tournament. The team has been a major morale builder for the New York-based chauffeured transportation company.**



**LCT:** *Why are programs to boost employee morale important for an operator?*

**Mackasek:** It stimulates dialogue between supervisors and staff. The whole thing is to establish a rapport and feel part of a team and develop that concept. An incentives-and-rewards program has to be publicized and objective. That's important as well as publicizing the results, so people can see and track their own performance. It's not so much we're getting more sales as a result of this, but we are getting happier employees who are more motivated and don't feel their job is so boring. And it stimulates dialogue not associated with what you did wrong and correcting mistakes. If that's the only interaction they have, then that's problematic.



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**LCT:** *What are you saying to your employees about the recent economic turmoil?*

**Mackasek:** I communicate with staff in two ways. First, through inserts and memos that go into paychecks. I also have a

quarterly newsletter that we will expand to a monthly. In that newsletter, I have a column that talks about issues. Secondly, I meet with six to eight employees every four weeks, and a separate group of about six to eight chauffeurs every four weeks. The meetings are staggered at two-week intervals, so I'm hearing from a group of either employees or chauffeurs every two weeks. I invite them in, order lunch in, and we sit around and talk for a few hours. I start out by bringing them up to date about issues in the company such as this most recent crisis. They can communicate directly with the

top guy. They don't have to talk just with their immediate supervisor or manager. I can talk to people who really have their fingers on the pulse of the client base. Chauffeurs talk to five or six clients per day, and customer service representatives, about seven to eight. They know much better what their clients are saying, and problems they are having. What can they do better? What are they not happy with? I get a lot of great feedback from that. And it helps me in my strategic planning for the company. **LCT**  
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