

BY ROD O'CONNOR

THE IC BUS PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE AWARD WAS DESIGNED TO RECOGNIZE DEALERS WHO GREW THEIR MARKET SHARE AND EXCEEDED THEIR VOLUME PLAN IN 2012. CHOSEN FROM 47 DEALERSHIPS ACROSS NORTH AMERICA, THESE FOUR WINNERS LAUNCHED INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS TO ENSURE CUSTOMER SATISFACTION.

# DEALERS OF THE YEAR

“  
We need to make sure every piece of equipment that leaves here is safe and fit to travel the road.”

-DOUG HARVEY

**D**oug Harvey began his career with Navistar at age 25, and in 1981, at the ripe old age of 27, he and a partner bought the troubled International Truck dealership in his Canadian hometown of Winnipeg, Manitoba. Seven years later, he was the sole owner. School buses were an important part of his business from day one, and still are today, as Maxim has maintained a three-decades-long relationship with the province of Manitoba. The key to that longevity, Harvey says, is recognizing the similarities between truck and bus customers. “A school bus contractor is no different from any other fleet,” he points out. “It has to optimize its equipment.”

**What's the secret to your long-term relationship with Manitoba?**

We work with them in the same way we work with our large [truck] fleet customers. We keep them abreast of new technologies and make sure they get constant contact from our parts and service people. During school breaks, we gear up our service to look after them and perform warranty work, whether at our body shops or retail locations. We even have a portal for the fleet's own technicians to get certified.

**What does excellence mean to you?**

It's something that you strive for but never ever hit. It means always trying to be the best you can be. It sounds like a cliché, but it's true.

**To what do you attribute your company's growth over the years?**

We work hard on the people side of the business. I always remember we started out with



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23 employees and now we have 750. Those with the best people win. The products are very important, but in the end it is our people who have the lifelong relationships with our customers.

**How are you helping bus customers lower their cost of operation?**

For one thing, we let them do their own warranty work. And we provide longer service hours and more locations. Twenty years ago, everyone always had a spare bus. But nobody can afford extras today. We need to make sure every piece of equipment that leaves here is safe and fit to travel the road.

After six years climbing the corporate ladder at the world's largest privately held company, Holly Hogleund Klein had an epiphany. “I thought: ‘If I'm going to work that hard, why should I do it for someone else's family business?’ ” So she brought her master's degree and business know-how to the school bus dealership started in 1948 by her grandfather, Stuart Hogleund. Over the next decade-plus, Hogleund Klein helped hone the operations side of the business as it grew to one of the Midwest's most successful dealers. Last year she assumed the leadership reins from



**DOUG HARVEY**

Maxim, Inc. (Winnipeg, Manitoba)

Age: 59

Biggest challenge of 2012: Budget constraints

her parents, Wayne and Lisa Hoglund, who operated the business for years and who still set the pace for the company's stellar reputation.

**What's the most important thing you learned from your father?**

That the customers come first. Being a salesperson doesn't come as natural to me—I tend to think more about the growth of the business—but he's helped me develop that [commitment to the customer]. We complement each other really well.

**What does excellence mean to you?**

I'm a person who likes to take classes, read books and help grow herself. I have a sense of obligation to customers and our employees. If I don't leave here making one thing better every day, then I'm not doing my job.

**What's the biggest compliment you've ever received from a customer?**

'I know Hoglund will always take care of us.' Our customers know we will do whatever it takes. But we can't take that reputation for

**HOLLY HOGLUND KLEIN**

President, Maxim, Inc. (Winnipeg, Manitoba)

Age: 42

**Accomplishment of 2012:** Employee leadership training



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“If I don't leave here making one thing better every day, then I'm not doing my job.”

-KELLY BACKHOLM

granted. When you're striving to be the best, you need to know that things can quickly go the other way.

**What's your best memory from your childhood that involved school buses?**

My dad converted a 1962 International bus into a camper. It was a bus traded in from a customer, and he raised the roof and had it painted in our shop. One year we took it up to Yellowstone. We were kind of like the Partridge Family.

While in his teens, Kelly Backholm dreamed of being a rock star—not joining the family business. But he changed his tune in his early twenties and followed in the well-traveled shoes of his father, Roy, selling buses throughout western Canada. Today he leads a dealership that supplies vehicles to contractors and school districts stretching from Quebec to Vancouver and virtually everywhere in between.

**What was it that made you realize you loved the school bus industry?**

I loved the freedom. We had a big territory, and my first year in sales I put 120,000 miles on the car. I loved getting out there and meeting people. It's the same way today. We don't wait for customers to come to the office—we go out to them.

**What's the biggest compliment you've ever received from a customer?**

I've received numerous letters over the years from customers about staff members who have gone out of their way to make a situation right, whether that means getting them a replacement bus or sending a tech out to service their equipment. That means a lot.

**What was it like growing up in the school bus business?**

I have a lot of memories of my father. He was



LORNE BRIDGMAN



**KELLY BACKHOLM**

President, Leeds Transit Inc. (Elgin, Ontario)

Age: 50

**Biggest challenge of 2012:** Logistics

extremely well liked and well respected. We lived right next door to the dealership, and he entertained customers all the time. Sometimes they'd stay overnight. As a kid, I tried to stay out of trouble on the school bus. I knew my dad would hear about it because, chances are, the bus was from one of his customers.

**How has the school bus industry changed over the years?**

It used to be any backyard mechanic could fix a bus. Not anymore. Now your techs have to know computers. That's why we provide courses for our customers; we have a rep who travels to their garages and trains their technicians on the latest technology. We know that when our customers' buses are running, everyone is happy.

When founder Gerald B. Leonard passed away in 1978, his 22-year-old son Mike stepped up and held the then-fledgling business together. Thirty-five years later, Leonard Bus Sales is one of the top dealerships on the East Coast, with four locations in New York State and LBS South, a newly minted operation serving Jacksonville. Celebrating his 40th year in the school bus business in 2013, Mike Leonard is known for his customer support and his tireless championing of clean diesel technologies, promoting fleet replacement as the only true "green" solution.

**What's your business philosophy?**

Wake up and do the right thing all day, every day, and the rest will take care of itself.

**What are the keys to a productive long-term customer relationship?**

Listening! We formed a Leonard Bus Sales customer advisory board back in 2001. We have three meetings a year with twelve influential customers and they provide us with valuable feedback relative to our current products, as well as what they need in the future. We launched a similar board with LBS South in December 2012.

**What's the most fun part of the business for you?**

Providing opportunities to our staff, and coaching and mentoring. I feel our industry has a wonderful story to tell. We have an amazing opportunity to provide safe transportation for the future of our country—and to replace older buses with safer, cleaner and greener buses.

**What does being a member of the pupil transportation industry mean to you?**

It's very unique. We don't look at it as a job—we look at it as a calling and a passion and that's why our company has been successful. It's about understanding our role, and our role is to provide leadership and support to benefit safer and greener transportation of our country's future.

**MIKE LEONARD**

President, Leonard Bus Sales (Saratoga Springs, New York)

Age: 57

**Biggest challenge today:** Federal emissions standards



ERIC MCNATT

