

## THE MOLEMAN

*A Cincinnati entrepreneur is making mountains of money out of molehills.*

### Brad Harbison

As he crawls out of his 1986 Toyota Tercel Station Wagon, Tom Schmidt thoroughly scans his customer's landscape, makes a few mental notes, then proceeds with the task at hand: mole control.

With a claw-like hand rake and notepad in hand, Schmidt, better known throughout the Cincinnati, Ohio-Northern Kentucky area as "The Moleman," moves from trap to trap, adjusting, adding, or relocating each trap as needed and recording his findings/actions taken in his notepad.

This late-April day is not a good one for the 57-year-old Schmidt. A recent drought has left the soil dry and fine, allowing some of his existing traps to become dislodged from the ground and making the placement of new traps a more difficult and time-consuming process. Still, the tall and gangly Schmidt repeats this routine several more times this day and, more often than not, **he gets his mole.**

After making all his scheduled route stops, Schmidt returns to his in-home office from which he runs The Moleman Professional Mole Trapping. It's a business that has flourished behind a philosophy that to be successful, do one thing - in Schmidt's case, mole control - and do it better than anyone else.

Schmidt has found a market niche - providing a needed service that is both technically difficult and multi-faceted - and he's figured out how to offer the service profitably, but without compromising its quality.

**HOW HE'S DONE IT.** On an early spring day **17** years ago, Schmidt was working in his yard when spotted a mole emerging from the surface, pushing up a mound of dirt.

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Although dismayed by the damages the moles were causing to his grass and plants, a light bulb went off in Schmidt's head. A small businessowner most of his adult life, Schmidt, who at the time was a candy maker for Cincinnati-based ice cream and candy **maker** Graeter's, started thinking there might be profits to be made providing mole control services.

"Drive through a nice neighborhood and take a look at some of the lawns," Schmidt said. "A lot of people don't play tennis or golf - they work on their lawns. **The lawns** become status symbols. That's where they want to spend their money."

So, Schmidt headed off to the local library to find books on moles and began contacting rodent experts and university entomologists, intent on learning "all things moles." He was immediately fascinated by these mammals, which have many characteristics unique unto themselves (see sidebar, page ##).

During his research, it became apparent to Schmidt that the biology and behavior of moles was so complex that if the work were not done with precision and attention to detail, the service provider would be setting himself up for failure.

In Schmidt's mind, a market opportunity was just waiting for a business devoted solely to mole control, so in 1986, **Schmidt** traded in his Graeter's apron for mole traps and equipment and officially opened up The Moleman.

**WISE DECISIONS.** After months of extensive mole research and testing of traps, Schmidt felt confident that he could trap moles. What he was less certain about were the details of running a mole control business.

“Anyone can trap a mole, but that doesn’t mean they can deliver mole control as a service,” Schmidt says.

Since Schmidt did not know of anyone who had ever attempted to offer mole control exclusively he didn’t have a blueprint to follow nor any colleagues with whom to compare notes.

Still, Schmidt was able to put his past business knowledge to work. The son of an industrial insurance salesman, **Schmidt observed how his father managed his work routes and his fathers attention to service.** (deleted the next line)

Realizing he would need to keep operating costs at a minimum, one of Schmidt’s first purchases was the 86’ Toyota Tercel Station Wagon, a 4-cylinder, standard transmission vehicle that is big enough to carry all of his equipment, yet still fuel-efficient.

Schmidt decided it was best to offer mole control to customers as a yearly, renewable service. In other words, for a flat fee Schmidt makes as many trips to an account for mole control services as needed during a one-year period. The frequency of visits can vary from once or twice per month to once or twice per week depending on the severity of the problem and the time of year.

Mole behavior and biology, especially these animals’ tunneling tendencies and ability to re-colonize, helped Schmidt set up his routes. For example, by their very nature moles will take the path of least resistance and therefore create complex mazes. They will also re-colonize and take over existing tunnels or a home range. Taking these and other factors into consideration, Schmidt concluded that trapping moles currently damaging a lawn **would not be** an end-all, **or** permanent solution. **"It wasn't going to be a losing battle either. Just a constant battle."**

“I decided not to charge on a per mole basis because it’s like **using an ice pick on termites and charging per insect,**” Schmidt said. “You might do big volume, but in the end you will not have happy customers and not get renewals.”

**A MARKET WAS WAITING.** Schmidt’s gamble to leave the job security he had at Graeter’s and open up The Moleman proved to be a good one. Many Cincinnati homeowners frustrated with the damages being done by moles were searching for a solution.

Schmidt’s business began with a just a handful of customers but he quickly added others through referrals.

“I enjoyed those first few years because every property was new to me and the part of the job I like the most is setting up new properties,” he said. “You figure out which areas of the lawn are most likely to have mole tunnels.”

Those early years also gave Schmidt time to hone his craft and become more of a mole control expert. In addition to figuring out that systemic trapping was best for mole control, he learned which tools and traps worked best and when weather conditions are not conducive for trapping. He was also finding out that mole removal is an ongoing process and by no means an exact science.

“How does a fisherman know where to the best spots on the lakes to find fish? From experience,” Schmidt says. “He casts his line, then if he doesn’t catch any fish he moves to another spot. The same is true when placing mole traps.”

Schmidt’s business grew steadily throughout the years, so much so in fact, that he soon realized he could no longer be a one-man operation. In 1995, his brother Dick joined the

company. He would later add his daughter, **Sara**, another brother, Jim and Bob Hay, a retired mailman **turned mole fanatic**.

**EDUCATING THE PUBLIC.** Although it is crystal clear to Schmidt and his four other mole control specialists why moles are best controlled on a year-round servicing plan, the same is not true for most of the general public.

Because Schmidt's mole control services are so specialized and because of the high labor costs associated with making frequent customer visits, he charges his customers accordingly.

"You can always find someone to do a job cheaper but nobody can offer what I offer and that is 15 years of professional mole trapping experience and five professional mole trappers who will respond right away to a problem and then stay with the account **over the long haul,**" Schmidt says.

Still, as most PCOs can attest, regardless of the quality of the work, customers will often not renew their contracts if they find a cheaper service.

"I'm not a nice person and I am not a salesman," Schmidt says. "I am very matter of fact. I explain to the customers their situation, what it will take and how much it will cost them. I've even thought of running an advertisement in the newspaper that says 'If you want cheaper mole control services call someone else.'"

Schmidt added that he has had some customers not renew with him, then return a year later because they were unhappy with their new service providers.

To help educate customers Schmidt launched [www.themoleman.com](http://www.themoleman.com), a Web site filled with content he describes as "factual information and honest advice on mole behavior, ecology and mole control."

But it's not just customers who seek out Schmidt for his mole expertise. Despite being self-educated and having zero pest control experience prior to starting up his business, he has done extensive research and compiled numerous graphs and valuable statistics. Schmidt has given numerous lectures on moles at various conferences held at state universities such as Ohio State University, Purdue University, Penn State University and Clemson University. He has also been interviewed in a number of trade magazines and featured in local newspapers.

**WHAT'S NEXT.** Having watched his business grow steadily since it started and observing the willingness in which people will pay for mole control services, the thought of offering mole control nationally has crossed Schmidt's mind. He knows, however, that in order for this to happen he would have to **turn his business over to his brothers** and then accept some type of training position with a large national lawn care company.

"It would be the best money they ever spent," he says. "If they advertise that they'll provide regular lawn care, **plus a guaranteed mole control service**, they will run all their competition out of town."

Still, despite the wear of tear that comes from 15 years of checking mole traps as well as the frustrations that can arise from dealing with uneducated, disloyal customers, Schmidt is content in being the Queen City's resident mole control expert.

"The business is still growing and I still enjoy what I am doing," he says. "I still find moles fascinating."

**\*\*\*art: run photo of mole that was scanned in sidebar\*\*\***

## A City Made For Moles

Which pest reigns supreme in the Queen City? If you said “moles” you certainly would have a strong foundation from which to base your argument.

Although moles can be found practically anywhere in United States, the Cincinnati-Northern, Ky. area seems particularly well suited for moles. Why is this so? To gain an understanding of why moles are so problematic in Cincinnati it is critical to study the biology and behavior of moles and how Cincinnati’s environment supports these pests.

Moles are no different from other pests in that they will make their habitat in areas that provide them with food, water and shelter. Since moles are woodland animals, they will seek “green” areas. Moreover, a mole’s home range will consist of both high ground and low ground. Cincinnati, located along the Ohio River and in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, is filled with an abundance of high ground/low ground landscapes.

“If a mole is living only in high ground he can’t take a drought so he’ll tunnel down into a valley as the moisture retreats,” says Tom Schmidt, owner of The Moleman Professional Mole Trapping. “And if he just lives in the valley he’ll get flooded out.”

To travel back and forth from high ground to low ground moles will tunnel. A specialized bone and muscle construction enables tunneling. Moles can exert a lateral digging force equivalent to 32 times its body weight.

At the end of its “tunneling journey,” a mole will push up a large dirt mound and, in some instances, uproot flowers and disturb other landscaping - leaving eyesores on otherwise well-maintained lawns. The reason mole control is a popular service is because people will pay to have their lawns kept free of moles and the damages they incur. While a number of pest control and lawn care companies offer mole control services, to Schmidt’s knowledge he is the only one who offers mole control as an exclusive service.

Moles also will tunnel to get to their food sources. Earthworms are a mole’s primary food source; however, **periodical cicadas (17 year locust) provide an enormous protein source for moles.** Here’s how periodical cicadas become an available food source to moles: When the cicadas emerge from their cycle, they slit the **ends of tree limbs** and lay their eggs. **These eggs fall** to the ground when tree limbs fall and some will be knocked to the ground by wind. These displaced eggs feed on and live off a tree’s roots, and thus provide moles - ground-dwelling animals - an accessible and desirable food source.

Because cicadas are cyclical, they are only an available food source for moles in years just prior to and following their emergence. Therefore, in most parts of the country moles will have to seek other food sources to survive through long periods between cicada cycles. However, there are areas of the country in which more than one brood of cicada emerges periodically. Such is the case with Cincinnati, where brood X, appeared in 1987, but is not scheduled to reappear again until 2004. However, during that time, brood XIV emerged (in 1991) and brood V emerged (in 1999). These multiple brood emergences resulted in more cicada-feeding opportunities for Cincinnati’s moles.

“There are certain areas of the country that have multiple brood emergences, so how much of a mole problem you have really depends on where you live,” Schmidt said. “People call Cincinnati a good mole city because of the tie-ins moles have with cicadas.”

\*\*\*sidebar 2\*\*\*

### Amazing Mole Facts

Homeowners and mole control enthusiasts throughout the United States and abroad have found the ultimate mole resource, [www.themoleman.com](http://www.themoleman.com) <<http://www.themoleman.com>>. Created by Schmidt as a service to the general public the Web site is packed with facts on mole behavior, biology and control and it also includes a section detailing amazing mole characteristics such as:

For moles to dig one meter of tunnel requires between 400 and 4,000 times as much energy as does walking for the same distance on the surface."

A 5 ounce mole will consume 45 to 50 lbs. of worms and insects per year.

A moles surface tunneling or probes can be dug at about 18 feet per hour. A moles speed through existing tunnels is about 80 ft. per minute.

Moles contain twice as much blood and twice as much red hemoglobin as other mammals of similar size, allowing the mole to breath easily in its underground environment of low oxygen and high carbon dioxide.

Source: [www.themoleman.com](http://www.themoleman.com)