

1 **FAST 100** | NO. 1 COMPANY



Christian Brown joined Slate in 2012 and has overseen its growth spurt.

SLATE CONSTRUCTION

COMMERCIAL CONSTRUCTION

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► **CLOSER LOOK**

Fast 100 rank: 1
HQ: Houston
Founded: 2010
Top exec: Christian Brown, president
Revenue: \$23.82 million
Employees: 12
What it does: General contractor for office, industrial and multifamily projects

DANIEL ORTIZ/HBJ



Houston-based Slate Construction has thrived in Houston's cutthroat commercial real estate market. Between 2014 and 2015, the firm's gross total revenue more than doubled, from just over \$9 million to nearly \$24 million.

Slate Construction works on office, industrial and multifamily projects, among others. The firm was founded in late 2010 by D. Scott Brown, and his son, Christian, joined the company in 2012. The father-son duo brings rich experience from major Houston-area commercial construction firms, but they assume different roles in the office, too – Christian takes on more office management responsibilities, while his father handles the “nuts and bolts” of deals and works more in the field, Christian said.

Christian talked with the Houston Business Journal about the company's success, what profitable contractors are doing in the slump, and the biggest boons in commercial real estate.

Describe your company culture. I hate the term “family culture,” because we do have employees, but we treat everyone like they're family. If they need to take kids to school events, we don't really harp on vacation days or time off from work. It's a two-way street. Family

is more important than work. We have an open-door policy. As long as you get your job done, it's OK.

How do you and your father work together? We worked for different contractors and we worked on really different types of projects. My dad worked for Brookstone, which does a lot of churches and more privately held things with different types of clients. I worked for E.E. Reed and Cadence McShane, so I come from an industrial, tilt-wall background. We both brought different management styles. It brought a good mix of projects to Slate.

What led you and your father to start Slate Construction? My father worked for a company for a short amount of time, and that company decided to close their doors. They went out of business and he had a couple of projects that were ongoing and it forced him to start his own business and take over those projects. He started that business in December 2011. A year later, I joined him. Essentially, we had been competitors for our entire career, and I took the opportunity to spend his last 10 years in the industry to work together. It's been a success.

What separates Slate from the competition? We are more focused on quality than price. Our No.

1 focus is to have repeat clients. If that means risking a little bit of profit for providing a higher quality service, that's what we try to focus on. We only chase projects we know we can be successful on and if that means we have to lower our price to stay competitive, that's acceptable to us. Some other folks can't take a job for a reduced price.

Is that a majority of the contractors working in Houston?

Well, I mean, I think in our industry, we have folks that are taking jobs too cheap to just weather the storm. That's not been our management style quite yet. It may turn into that, but I don't understand the mentality of thinking, “Let's go do a job for free.” We're all doing this to make a living and we've got folks doing work for virtually free. I don't see that we're in those dire straits yet.

We've noticed an uptick in fast, fairly budget-conscious office renovations. Have you seen more of that kind of work? Some of the quick, fast-paced remodel work is happening quite a bit, actually. The larger, ground-up new construction – we haven't really run into just yet. But the 60- to 90-day projects – I think people are just trying to maintain cash flow.

What kinds of companies are the ones doing work for virtually

nothing? Their overhead is such that they have 20, 30 or 40 employees, and they have to cover their salaries, so they're covering salaries and not worrying about project margins. Projects have become few and far between. There are projects that we've bid on in the past six months that haven't happened.

What's the biggest challenge you've faced this year? The largest struggle is finding good, qualified employees and keeping them happy. I think that's pretty much in any business. The construction work is easy, but maintaining a good base of quality employees is the most difficult.

Where are you seeing the biggest uptick in business? I would say that the industrial sector near the Port area is probably where the largest growth is coming. Not quite enough.

How have you evolved as a leader? I have definitely become more understanding, but also more results-based versus facetime-based. If you can get your job done in 25 hours a week versus 50 hours a week, more power to you. I've become more understanding of personal time versus work time.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.