

THE HOT

Who's shaking up the industry today and making it a unique, successful, challenging and innovative sector? The members of the 2016 Counselor Hot 25. Check out their stories.

By Michele Bell, Betsy Cummings, Lauren Kravec and C.J. Mittica

The ability to stand out today is crucial to success. It determines who gets noticed and who rises to the top at a time when just about everybody is doing something to get attention.

The people on the following pages epitomize success today; they're not only helping to grow their companies, but also growing their own profiles and getting noticed. It's the 2016 Counselor Hot 25 – a group of people who are making noise in the promotional products industry and reaping the benefits.

These professionals are certainly taking the market by storm and most definitely not looking back. They're sparking creativity and innovation in the industry by approaching the business in highly unique ways. As a whole – listed on the following pages in alphabetical order by first name – it's a group that stands out for its energy, vision and inspiration.



BAYO SIMMONDS
With some people, you need a few sentences to explain exactly why they're on the Hot List. But just one look at Bayo Simmonds, the owner and founder of the apparel company Assertive Creativity LLC (asi/37166), does the job in this case. This guy's got game and so much charisma, his aura has an aura. Not since the likes of Jay-Z and Diddy has someone owned their look with so much swagger.

Born in Brooklyn to a Nigerian father and a mother from St. Thomas, Simmonds started his company in 2009 with an unabashed love of apparel design. "I picked the name of my company because it described our approach to fashion," says Simmonds. "Coming from the fashion industry, I learned that you had to be assertive in your designs to survive. And since our passion is creativity, this is the best way I could think to approach this industry."

And Simmonds, ever the confident entrepreneur, maintains that while he never expected overnight success, he's in the industry for the long haul. "We're a young company, so we're looking for clients to grow with us."



CHRIS SINCLAIR & SHAUN LICHTENBERGER

As far as Chris Sinclair and Shaun Lichtenberger are concerned, Tony Robbins said it best: "If you're not growing you're dying." That mantra has informed their business for the past seven years, spurring them to make unorthodox decisions, such as going catalog free. The duo, vice president and president, respectively, of Brand Blvd (asi/145124), an Ontario-based distributor, decided long ago that following the status quo was not an option. Last year, that meant reimagining the company, redesigning their logo, office space and more. The point was not just to spruce up the place, says Lichtenberger, but to inspire staff to reach greater heights. Growth, Sinclair says, is often not about numbers. "It can be increasing efficiencies, refining a process or looking at your business through a different lens."

Finding ways to embrace that entrepreneurial spirit has made the difference in helping the company stay ahead of competitors and keeping staff motivated. Says Lichtenberger, "Our team of rock stars continues to grow and evolve, which has a direct correlation to our numbers."



CAROL DEVILLE
There are industry celebrities, and then there are Celebrities – so iconic they can get by with one name, like Cher and Madonna. Such is the case with "DeVilLe," as she's known both in her home country of Canada and among pros in the U.S. lucky enough to be caught in her considerable orbit. "I was introduced to this industry in 1992 and I have never looked

back," says DeVille. "In 2008, I created TBC (The Branding Company) to build a grassroots company that would be a home for a team that wanted to learn, be amazing, increase their talent, leverage their learning from others and become amazing – where anything is possible."

To see her walk the PPPC Show with her cadre of young female staffers is a sight to behold, as you literally see one generation teaching – and passing the torch to – the next. Her advice for younger sales pros in the industry is as on-point as you'd expect for one of the leaders in the business: "For every challenge you encounter, think of two solutions – you'll be amazed at what you can figure out," DeVille says. "And set goals for yourself: balance them by applying 25% to business, 25% to learning, 25% for your family and friends, 25% for you – address your list quarterly and you'll be just as amazed at what you achieved. As a company or as an individual, you need to find your own USP (Unique Selling Proposition) that you develop with your clients, your company, your suppliers and, most importantly, with your team."



CHRIS FERRITER, SPENCER KRAMER & SCOTT LATIMER

To those who think millennials look at the promo industry with an eye roll and a jaded yawn, allow us to introduce the triumvirate at the head of the hottest young distributorship in Miami: SoBe Promos (asi/245603). Helmed by three University of Miami college pals in their late 20s, these guys – and the young, whip-smart team working for them – are already devotees.

"We've put our own spin on it and made the industry sexy in our own way," says Chris Ferriter, one of the company's three principals, along with Scott Latimer and Spencer Kramer – son of Jeff Kramer, the industry legend who founded Bullet Line and pioneered the concept of five-day turnaround 30 years ago. "There's nothing cooler than seeing Richard Branson wearing the shirt you made for Virgin Cruises, Avicii rocking the snapback you did at Ultra Music Festival, or the people of Google walking around Google campus with the backpacks you had made. That's what we're trying to do with promotional products – get people away from pens and stress balls and let them see that these items can be creative."

And you just have to love a group of guys with the talent, ambition and *cojones* to throw down the gauntlet with this audacious goal: "In five years, we see ourselves as repeat winners of the Counselor Fastest Growing Distributor award and breaking into the Top 40," Ferriter says. "As a group of young individuals in the industry, we foresee using the newest trends, the Internet and social media to help us vault into the conversations of distributors that people should be paying attention to."



COURTNEY RAMOS-FINCHER

By this point, the A.R.K. Ramos Architectural Signage (asi/37150) office parties are as much legend as tradition. Not a lampshade-on-your-head sort of legend – more one that embraces the ethos of the company’s founder, Max Ramos, who had a penchant for production and innovation, says his granddaughter, Courtney Ramos-Fincher, the company’s president and CEO. “I came here for all the office parties since I was little,” Ramos-Fincher says.

The parties, she says, “were very family-oriented” with little “delineation between employees and everyone else.”

That attitude has fostered employee loyalty and created an atmosphere where workers simply don’t leave. Some have been with the firm for more than 30 years. These days, the company focuses on streamlining processes, such as Ramos-Fincher’s idea to push for a paperless office to increase productivity and efficiency.

As for the family focus, Ramos-Fincher has honored her grandfather’s legacy by creating a kids area with toys, books, a computer and TV for employees who occasionally need to bring children to work.

DANIEL WEBB

After 30 years of record-setting growth, it was hard to suddenly grind to a halt, much less slide backwards. But nine years ago, Webb Company (asi/95838) was threatened by the recession and “ran into some tough years,” says Daniel Webb, president of the Eagan, MN-based company.

Webb, who’s nothing if not motivated to both answer to and carry forth the legacy of his father’s company, says he feels compelled to build a better brand for his children, should they want to take over some day. So in 2009, he focused on rebuilding the company’s once steady growth. Last year that meant traveling to “nearly every state, attending everything from leadership conferences to major trade shows to regional shows, client visits, end-user shows and everything in between,” Webb says.

The result was 20% growth for the year. Doing so helps keep Webb more innovative, service oriented and focused on client needs and desires. Says Webb, “I want to grow this company back to bigger and better than it ever was before.”



EDDIE BLAU

Eddie Blau is no stranger to challenges. When he left his job as a corporate attorney two decades ago to join Innovation Line (asi/62660), the supplier was just a small family business. Today, the company has grown immensely, increasing sales by 73% between 2012 and 2014 alone under Blau, who is now CEO.

In September, Blau led Innovation Line as it faced another challenge. A fire damaged part of the company’s operating facilities and about a fifth of its inventory. Blau credits Innovation Line’s employees and its overseas factories, who helped “day and night” with rebuilding.

Now, Blau is hoping to grow Innovation Line even further, expanding into different regions to reduce delivery times. No matter what obstacles he faces, though, Blau’s original goal will always be the same: “To create something of lasting value in an exciting and interesting industry.”



DANIEL BAKER

It’s not that Daniel Baker didn’t want to be a marketing manager – he just wanted to be a rock star and commercial pilot first. “I came out of adolescence with the burning desire to be a professional musician,” says Baker, who now oversees marketing for Debco Solutions (asi/48880), a supplier based in Ontario.

Years later, he enrolled in a local flight college.

Impractical pursuits? Hardly. Baker, now the number-one marketer behind his company’s campaigns, says his business judgment is better informed because of earlier career pursuits – not the least of which is enhanced creativity. That’s in part the reason Baker’s pet project since joining the firm three years ago – a database system capable of processing over 9 million bits of information – provides unprecedented insights about growth potential the company hadn’t seen before. That’s allowed Debco execs to better understand customer “buying habits, geographic tendencies, product lifecycles and hundreds of other meaningful insights,” says Alex Morin, Debco’s executive vice president.

DAT DANG

“I guess I’m basically living the American dream,” says Dat Dang, president and founder of supplier firm Chao (asi/48102), which is disrupting the marketplace with artful, customized pop-up greeting cards.



Dang has always been a disrupter. As a child, he turned his \$3 lunch budget into an entrepreneurial venture by buying Jolly Ranchers for \$.10 and selling them for a quarter. That and other business lessons learned along the way, from his immigration

to the U.S. as a 7-year-old following the Vietnam War, to his place as a member whose company is one of Inc.’s 5,000 fastest-growing companies, have informed his outlook on the promotional products marketplace. That lifelong effort has culminated into Chao’s delicate creations, whose pop-up art is well beyond the service of a greeting card, and more a desktop ornament and permanent art piece.

ESMERALDA ANAYA

Esmeralda Anaya from Terry Town (asi/90913) is setting a precedent by being the supplier’s first marketing employee. And she is quite busy in the role: She manages all of the company’s databases, advertising and email campaigns, as well as creating social media accounts, tracking the success of efforts, attending trade shows and overseeing the company’s website redesign.

All that, and Anaya has been working at Terry Town – and in the promotional products industry – for only five months. In fact, she didn’t know of the industry’s existence before she joined Terry Town. “The interesting thing is that we are surrounded by so many promotional products on a daily basis and I never stopped to think about it,” she says. “After getting acquainted with the industry, it has gotten much easier to decide on the best marketing decisions for the company.”



JENNIFER ARENSON

It seemed like an odd leap to say the least, moving from graphic designer to bookkeeper. But if her employee was game, so was Jennifer Arenson, owner and CEO of Global Sourcing Connection (asi/208403), a distributor based in Riverwoods, IL. In fact, it was sort of Arenson’s idea.

“We have a lot of people who have roles that are unrelated to

the job we originally hired them to do,” Arenson says. That may seem unorthodox, but Arenson insists it keeps ideas fresh and prevents employees from being “pigeonholed” into one job or another. More to the point, it helps team members better understand the company’s various functions and spurs ideas for growth. To help one designer understand how the company’s products fit into a real-world setting, for example, Arenson suggested he get involved with sales. Seeing how the product was being used by way of sales meetings with clients in the field shifted his focus and improved his skills as a designer. Says Arenson, “Really, I want to be a positive agent of change for the people in my company.”

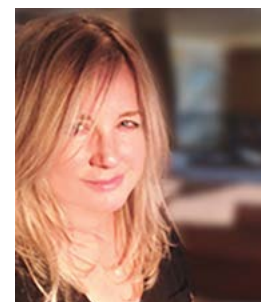
JILL STIRNKORB

While this industry has its fair share of gregarious personalities, few match the level of infectious enthusiasm for the business extolled by BIC Graphic’s (asi/40480) vice president of inside sales, Jill Stirnkorb. “What can I say: It’s been a crazy, fun ride all these years and it’s part of my DNA,” says Stirnkorb. “I love that this industry is still a relationship-based business – it really feels like a big family. Everyone is willing to help each other, and I still have really great relationships with some of the first people I met 25 years ago.”



Stirnkorb says that as much as she relies on technology, she still prefers to pick up the phone and talk with customers. “Email, social media and all the technology in the world does not replace a good phone call or face-to-face meeting.”

She feels a special responsibility to mentor younger women in the business, as she was only the third female in the sales force when she started at BIC. “We had to work twice as hard to be recognized, but I was fortunate that my first manager was a female who was not only a great role model, but a mentor as well,” she recalls, adding her advice for young salespeople in the industry. “Be prepared; be true to your word; if you commit to something, follow through; plan your work and work your plan; and listen twice as much as you talk.” And of course, from the woman known by so many people in the industry: “Continuous networking is so important, as this is a relationship-driven business – people buy from others they know and trust.”



KIM FISHER

Tulsa, OK, is a long way – and a far cry – from the glamour of a Hollywood studio. But four years ago, Kim Fisher found herself leaving a costume design business 25 years in the making and saying goodbye to the 42 shows she helped outfit for CBS Studios. She arrived in Tulsa, “thinking, ‘What the hell am I going to do?’” says Fisher, owner of Quashies

LLC (asi/80127), which makes custom hair ties. “My specialty was reading scripts and defining characters through their wardrobe.”

It turns out there’s a sizeable market for companies looking to personalize hair accessories, which includes Nike, MTV and JetBlue, among others. And, in hindsight, “I think all my experience has been put into this venture,” says Fisher, reflecting on



JESSICA HINER

Jessica Hiner has been at The Magnet Group (asi/68507) for the last eight years, most recently as its vice president of key accounts, but has been an industry diehard since she joined it right out of college. “Products, trends, focus points and people are always changing, and what was popular when I first started certainly isn’t what’s popular today, but consistent change makes things interesting, along with the personalities of the people we work with,” she says. “If I looked back to myself 14 years ago out of college and working for the distributorship I came

from before TMG, I would have never said I would be where I am today. I don’t know what the future holds for me, but I do know whatever role I take on, I want the close-knit/family-like team I have today and the support of those around me. As long as I can be around positive people, laugh and make people laugh as much as possible while doing it, a title means nothing. Life’s too short to put a title on anything ... go for what you love, and the rest falls into place.”

Then she adds with a wink and smile, “And don’t forget to ask for a paper proof.”



KEVIN ROLLINS

Kevin Rollins likes to credit Duke University for his company’s success. Not because they’re propping Rollins and his team up through orders of promotional products, but because the philosophical catchphrase of Blue Devil basketball inspires his approach to business. Attend a Duke basketball practice and you’ll hear “next play” repeatedly, says Rollins, co-owner of the aptly named Next Play Promotions, which is an AIA Corporation (asi/109480) affiliate. The

phrase is repeated, he says, to refocus players literally on the next play whenever they miss a shot or make an error. In that same sense, he wants his employees to do the same. And Rollins isn’t immune from the phrase’s effect. When one large client cut ties with Rollins in 2014, he refocused his sales efforts on another department within the same company, creating more sales than he’d had before.

the fact that Quashies combines her fashion and business sense formed over two decades running a company in Los Angeles.

As a market innovator, Fisher has noticed a lot of copycats in the past years, pushing her team to develop new printing processes on nylon and other hard-to-decorate fabrics. Apparently it’s paid off. Last year the company had a 48% re-order rate.

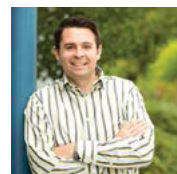


LUKE FREEMAN

Maybe it was the fact that he's produced a 10-minute pitch video for *The Apprentice*, or that he was a contestant on *Shark Tank* in 2013, but Luke Freeman knows a thing or two about selling. As the president of FL-based Wizard Creations (asi/362568) – named for his father who wore many hats, including teacher, magician and screenprinter – Freeman and his team, who grew the company from humble beginnings in his parents' garage, have shaken up the industry with an unorthodox sales approach. For starters, the company has shirked individual incentives and motivation for team-based selling, goals and rewards. "When the team wins, we all win," Freeman says, citing the firm's triple-digit growth. Freeman, inspired by his father who printed T-shirts past 2 a.m. after a day in the classroom, says his sellers are compensated based upon corporate growth, rather than individual sales results. Doing so creates greater employee investment in the firm. Says Freeman, "this strategy creates a team of winners all moving in the same direction."

NATHAN BAILEY

People thought Nathan Bailey was crazy to start his own business in the middle of a recession in 2009, but Ideation Promotions and Apparel (asi/229699) has not only survived but thrived over the last six years, increasing its sales fivefold. "It was a slow, slow burn for us to get to where we are now," he says. "Our success comes from doing more for our current customer base over time."



Bailey no longer sees Ideation as just a promotional products business anymore, but as more of a full-service agency, offering event planning and strategy, full-service creative design, packaging and signage and brand messaging and consulting. "We get to do a lot more and be a part of a lot more with our clients than just taking orders and delivering swag," Bailey says. "It's kind of a new challenge and adventure for me and for our team to be able to sit in with our clients to do that kind of stuff."



SCOTT CHASTAIN

Scott Chastain has an alter ego, and his name is Captain Stretch. No, that isn't just because he's 6-foot-5 – he has the ability to stretch the imaginations of people everywhere. And just like Batman has the Batcave, Captain Stretch has Everfan (asi/99553). Mixing his love of comic books and superheroes with his passion for college sports, Chastain started Everfan in 2011 when he launched a line of collegiate superhero capes. Since then, he's expanded to include customizable capes, masks, shirts and cuffs, as well as other costume accessories like crowns and tutus.

Chastain isn't just selling fun costumes, though. He also believes in capes' own powers, specifically their ability to give wearers superhuman confidence. He especially sees the effect his products have in hospitals, particularly with children who are suffering from health problems. "Capes are a great thing to give them a sense of power and make them think they can overcome challenges," he says. However, he also notes that his products do just as well with adults as they do with kids, and that there's "imagination and creativity within everybody."

Empowering people big and small? It's all in a day's work for Captain Stretch.

MARJHÉ JOHNSTON

After over a decade working as a nanny, two things changed in the life of Marjhé (Marzhay) Johnston: She joined Keya (asi/64602), where she takes care of the T-shirt supplier's top clients, and she became a foster parent two and a half years ago, housing seven different children in what she originally imagined would be "the ultimate nanny job."

"I thought my experience was going to help me, and maybe it did a little bit, but it's night and day," says the Greensboro, NC, resident. Johnston and James, her husband of five years, strive to give the children "unconditional love" and have found the experience rewarding.

So too has Johnston's entry into the business world. At Keya, she has excelled at finding solutions for clients while branching out into marketing and other responsibilities. The Kingston, Jamaica native, who moved to the U.S. when she was 2, is in for good. "I wanted to be a mom and a housewife for so long," she says, "but now that I'm working, I feel like I've tasted blood. I've got business ambitions on the mind."



SARAH PENN

It takes a certain kind of moxie to start your company in 2009, right in the middle of a recession, and in the UK no less, as Europe really took it on the chin economically. "We thought if we could make it work when times were tough, it would be a great experience to carry through to the more buoyant times to come," says Sarah Penn, managing director for Outstanding Branding (asi/288519).

Six years later, the company that started with Penn and her partner Andy Thorne has 20 people and is actively looking for more to join, as Penn says there's an aggressive growth plan in place for the next few years. "There's a lot to love about this industry: the constant innovation of products and print processes; the way that client expectations change and develop and we as distributors need to keep on top of those expectations," Penn says. "And the people! I'm sure there are few industries with as many brilliant people in it who love what they do and have so much fun doing it."

And proving that globalization is alive and well, Penn visited the ASI Chicago Show in 2015 and has clients in the States and around the world. "What I loved about the U.S. industry was the energy and positivity from everyone we met," she says. "The enthusiasm for the promo world was clear, and it's hard not to love that level of engagement."



SETH COHEN

Promotional products are a family business in two ways for Seth Cohen. The sales representative for All-In-One (asi/34256) is the son of founder Harris Cohen and has been attending trade shows since he was 12 years old. Despite being around the industry since childhood, working for the family business wasn't Cohen's plan until he was in college. After earning his degree in neuroscience and psychology, he started an unpaid research internship, but worked for his parents during off hours for money. Eventually, the internship ended and he joined All-In-One full time.

"It wasn't social enough for me," he says of his research internship. "Now I talk to 100 people or so a day. I get to meet all these people in different situations and learn from them."

Outside of working with his biological family, Cohen sees the promotional products industry as a family in itself. "Even somebody that would be a direct competitor will help you. Everyone is very friendly and open," he says. "There's a support structure that isn't in any other industry."



SHARI VERRONE

Shari Verrone had an instant hit when she created an elaborate centerpiece for a friend's baby shower in the vein of a three-tiered wedding cake. Soon enough, Stackable Sensations (asi/332999) was launched with creative bundles for all of life's biggest moments, but Verrone's business took a left turn into promotional products when a client asked to put a logo on 500 "Get Well" trays.

"I thought to myself, 'Hmm, I can do one cake, or I can do 500 pieces,'" recalls Verrone, a New Jersey native.

Thirteen years later, Verrone ensures the company continues to draw from the same creative vein. A few engaging company promotions include Willy Wonka-esque chocolate bars with golden tickets and bathroom stall self-promos for a captive audience advising "Don't Flush Your Marketing Dollars Down The Tubes."

"You have to really wow people with creativity to keep their attention, and I've never forgotten that," says Verrone, who credits an early mentor, Michelle Tomczyk, for instilling that lesson. At home, the proud soccer mom and wife juggles it all and loves to travel with her husband, teenage girls and parents.



STACEE GILMORE

Stacey Gilmore's mother ran an office supply and promotional product company for 26 years. Was it fate that her daughter would follow in her footsteps? "She wanted me to get a corporate job and not take this small-business route," says Gilmore.

It didn't work. After a brief dalliance in the corporate world, Gilmore took over the promo business and created Promotions Pronto (asi/301257) a decade ago. As the sole salesperson, the St. Louis-area resident is bumping up against a million dollars in sales through deep relationship building and impeccable customer service. Gilmore is active with several nonprofits and chambers of commerce, tapping into her proficiency for networking and the pleasure she takes in helping others be successful. And when she says she's very close with family, it's not just lip service – mom still works in the business too.

TAYLA CARPENTER

At iPROMOTEu (asi/232119), Tayla Carpenter's main job is helping the distributor meet its technology initiatives. But it's her work spearheading The Women's View, a collaborative program for the company's female owners and employees, that is galvanizing the Boston native. "I thought it was a unique way to support women in the industry," says Carpenter, "but it was also uncharted territory, so I was very much intrigued by the challenge, opportunity and potential rewards."

Carpenter coordinates a bevy of efforts, from webinars and online forums to an advisory council and networking receptions. When she's not hatching plans to expand the program, the music lover moonlights as DJ Neo Dawn, performing at clubs and private events. "When I'm at a party and the DJ's really bad," Carpenter says, "I get irritated and say 'Why didn't he play that?' I've always had the desire to keep the party going."



TERRI TOLMACK

With her upbeat and outgoing personality, it's surprising that Terri Tolmack was a self-described shy kid growing up. If she's as shy as she says, then how would this up-and-coming Proforma owner be able to nearly triple her sales in a year?

"I just became creative and innovative and decided that there was nothing I couldn't do," she says. If her clients had an idea, she would run with it, and if she couldn't come through with the exact product a client wanted, she could find an alternative that would make them just as happy, which is what she did when a client in the music industry wanted a customized bronze divider. After deciding that bronze was too costly, she came up with the idea to use wood and was able to personalize it to fit the company's image, and the order was a success.

It's that response to her work that drives her. "I'm a people pleaser, so I just love it when I've created something that is just over the top for them," she says. "I can take their vision and create it and make it into reality."