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We Name the  
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Coast to Coast

## 2023 INC. REGIONALS

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Inside **Shaquille O'Neal's** Entrepreneurial Empire

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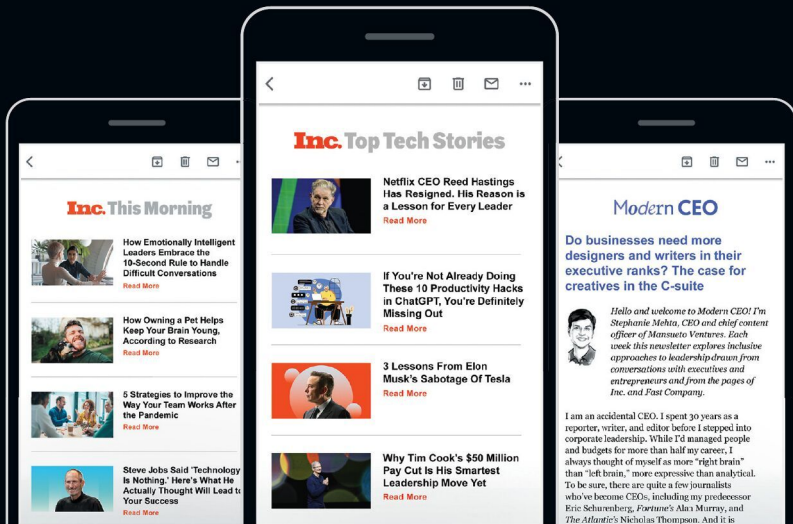
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GoodQues co-founders Maria Vorovich (left) and Holland Martini rewrote the rules for market research.



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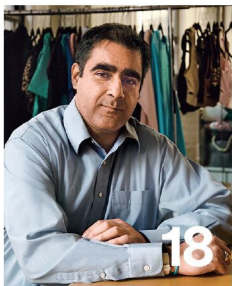
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ON THE COVER Shaquille O'Neal, photographed by Christian Cody in Atlanta.



T E X A S

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Luke Petro

### Real-world Entrepreneur Luke Petro Brings his Expertise to the Classroom

Meet Luke Petro. In addition to being a Certified Entrepreneurship Teacher, Luke has instructed students on entrepreneurship since 2015 at the Perspectives/IIT Math & Science Academy in Chicago and is an entrepreneur himself. This summer, he'll be sharing his vast knowledge with our students at the University of Michigan program location.

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## THE JOURNEY

I've always thought it best to write these Notes From Inc. in a personal way. To talk about my own experiences and how they connect to the stories in an issue and, ideally, to your work. This one's a bit more personal than usual. A snapshot from my childhood.

It was night, in the upstairs hall, and I don't know why I picked flight over flight, but I did, and, squaring off to avoid what would surely be a beatdown just because, I got low and lunged forward while rising up, my arms pushing out, my hands balled into fists, making contact with his chest, rocking him back, up, and off his feet, sending him crashing through the bathroom door and down to the floor.

I remember neither much of what came before nor what occurred after that. In fact, I don't recall much of my childhood at all. But on that night, when I was, think now, about 14, with my father lying in a drunken heap and too gone to grasp exactly what had happened, I knew I was safe for the moment, that meeting the violence of an abusive alcoholic with violence was the way, at least temporarily, to avoid more of it.

I grew up rough. I don't keep it a secret, and I'd tell anyone about it over—yes, yes, I know—a drink. It's also no secret that it all left me with some psychic scars—things like esteem issues and anxiety and years of behaving in ways I didn't quite understand, until a diagnosis of PTSD helped it make sense. It also left some sharp edges: an opposition to authority figures, a few trust issues, and certainly not the best interpersonal skills. When you get none of them in your formative years, compliments or praise remain not just foreign concepts, but unknown. Attributes not particularly useful around the office; ones that even ended my partnership in, ironically, a promising wellness startup.

Yes, those ingrained traits haven't served me well as an adult, I'm aware of that. But it's an entirely different thing to do something about it—even if you're already doing something about it. I'd had years of introspection and therapy, but the ROI—we've got to get back to busi-

ness at some point; this is Inc. after all, right?—wasn't as robust as one would like.

That realization set me off on a journey to a journey: psilocybin therapy with a trained psychologist following the MAPS protocol. I won't say more about it, these harmless mushrooms still being seriously illegal. And yet those who've known me after those treatments see a different person. I think I do too. Not a perfect person, mind you, but one who knows better, even if he doesn't always behave better, and certainly measurably different thanks to a series of six or eight psychedelic-assisted hours on a self-guided tour of my head and history, and the interpretation and integration sessions that followed. I'm grateful. It feels like I've reached minimum viable product stage, and I'll take it.

As entrepreneurs, we look to solve problems and optimize processes. Psilocybin can do that for a huge sector of our economy and the people in it. In looking at the increasingly voluminous research, and at my experience and that of others I know, it's clear that responsible therapeutic use of psilocybin and some other currently taboo medicines can uniquely fix a good chunk of our burgeoning mental health crisis in ways other treatments can't, even as they provide opportunities for new businesses. But don't take my word for it. I urge you to read "Prescription for Growth" (page 68) and explore the possibilities yourself. It'll be quite a trip—no mushrooms needed.

Scott Omelianuk  
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Inc. has been my professional home for more than 16 years. And for almost all that time, I've been a member of the integrated marketing team, developing creative programs and integrations for our marketing partners and sponsors across the full sweep of the Inc. portfolio.

As a result, I've come to know deeply the Inc. audience and your uncompromising stake in building purpose-driven businesses that transform industries, sectors, communities, lives, workplaces, and so much more—to make our world a better place.

In October, I transitioned to lead our outstanding ad sales team—a group of colleagues who treat our clients' businesses like their very own. Each of us understands the great responsibility we have in leveraging the brilliant work of our editorial team. That team, led by editor-in-chief Scott O., builds creative sponsorships and programs that connect founders to our partners' valued insights, products, services, and support—exactly what those leaders need to

manage and grow their businesses.

One of the most meaningful partnerships that Inc. has forged in the past few years is with Capital One Business. Together, in 2020, we launched the Your Next Move video series to spotlight how the savviest owners in business navigate change, problem-solve at speed, and drive positive outcomes for customers and employees. Across 2023, through in-person, virtual, and streaming events, Your Next Move host Beatrice Dixon, co-founder and CEO of the Honey Pot Company, will convene standout company founders and leaders with fast-growth track records to help owners meet the moment, overcome obstacles, and make smart, strategic next moves.

Also, this year, Inc. and Capital One Business are partnering to launch the all-new Inc. 5000 Community platform for mobile and desktop. This dedicated app will be exclusive to the leaders of Inc. 5000-honored companies, current and former—a class of the most successful entrepreneurs in business today. Here, Inc. 5000 founders and CEOs can engage in deeper content and connections, all aimed at fueling the

uncommon value of relationships with peers who understand how to grow successful companies against all odds. In this peer-to-peer community, founders and leaders, through their shared experiences, will forge invaluable bonds across industries, sectors, company and market sizes, and more.

Since the day I started, I've been proud to work at Inc., to serve all of you who start, run, and grow the businesses that remake our lives each day. And today I've never been prouder.

What's your next move? We can only hope that it's to keep building and keep growing. And to keep calling me and my team, to help make your business—and ours—better together.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jennifer Henkus".

**Jennifer Henkus**  
Senior Vice President,  
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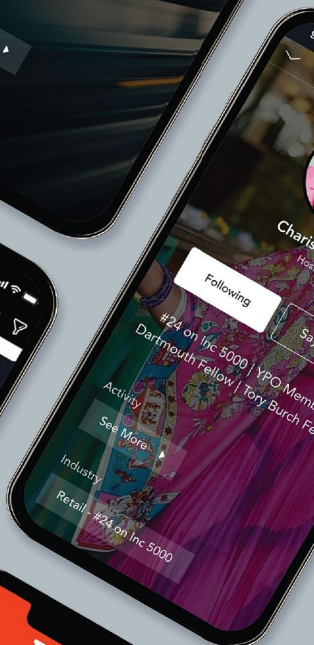
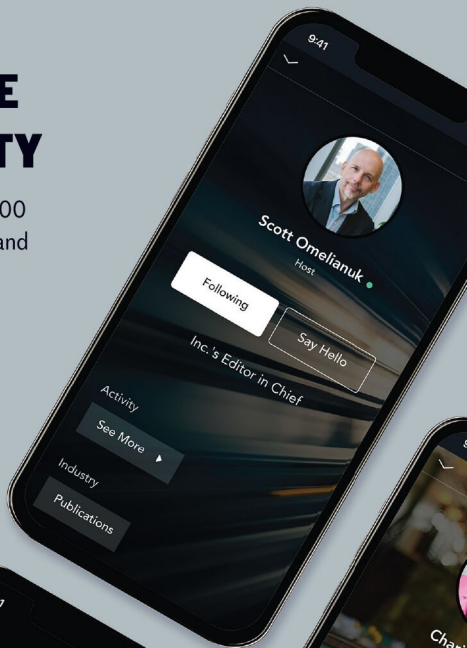
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Bombas co-founders  
Randy Goldberg (left)  
and David Heath.

I Was Wrong

## SOCKS. THEN UNDERWEAR

“How big can a sock company really be?” David Heath, CEO of Bombas, recalls thinking in 2018. His direct-to-consumer business was not just profitable; it was looking at a projected \$100 million in annual revenue, up from nearly \$2 million in 2014, its first full year of operations. “We had experienced far greater growth than we had anticipated,” says Heath. “A little bit of hubris started to creep in.”

Heath and his co-founder, Randy Goldberg, began to consider expansion, and they turned to their founding mission for inspiration. When Bombas launched, it had promised to donate one pair of socks—the most requested item at homeless shelters—for every pair it sold. Ranking below the demand for socks, underwear and T-shirts were



a close second and third.

T-shirts seemed easy enough, says Goldberg, who serves as chief brand officer, but “underwear is sized and constructed differently.” He knew Bombas would need entirely new templates and research around fit, silhouettes, and materials. But, he adds, “as a sock company, we didn’t have that in-house at the time.”

And that’s where Bombas made an error. Instead of investing the time into figuring out underwear—an item that

would align with its core mission—it pivoted to sweatshirts and sweatpants. “We thought, ‘These other things are easier. Let’s do those, and while we’re at it, we’ll figure out the underwear,’” Goldberg recalls. “It was like procrastinating instead of doing the hard work up front. We tried to take a shortcut.”

As it turns out, sweatsuits also required expertise that Bombas didn’t have. How tight should the fit be? What material should be used? Who was the target customer? Can you brand sweats the same way you brand socks?

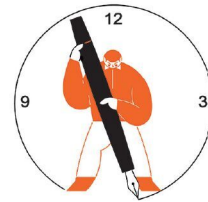
The company’s lack of experience, and forethought, was

immediately evident when the entire line launched in October 2019 with sweatshirt sleeves that were too short. The co-founders began to phase out the collection a month later.

It would have been better, says Goldberg, “if we’d spent that energy on finding the right person to help us with underwear.” And, lesson learned, Bombas went on to do just that.

Now, says Heath, it will be a very long time before Bombas strays so drastically from the three products the homeless community needs most: socks, underwear, and T-shirts.

—Ali Donaldson



Survey Says

**Q: What’s the biggest myth about entrepreneurship?**

**A:** That you get to be in control of your time, because you get to be your own boss.

—SHANE HEATH, CO-FOUNDER AND CEO, MUDWTR

Source: 2022 Inc. 5000 CEO Survey



Amy Errett, founder and CEO of Madison Reed.

Competitive Advantage

## HEARING IN COLOR

Amy Errett is a great storyteller. In fact, give the founder and CEO of Madison Reed 60 seconds, and there’s a very good chance you’ll find yourself wanting to buy her company’s hair dye sight unseen.

Errett launched Madison Reed in 2014 to create nontoxic hair dye—that also produces salon-quality results—for the millions of women who dye their hair at home. She says she named the company after her daughter because she believed so strongly in its mission: Women should not have to sacrifice health for beauty.

That origin story matters, according to Errett, because beauty is “100 percent predicated on emotion.” To convert customers, she knew she had to tell the brand’s story—and not through traditional marketing channels. Television ads often feel overproduced, says Errett, “and you can’t tell a story through a static Facebook ad.”

That’s why Madison Reed has, since its earliest days, spent anywhere from 15 to 25 percent of its marketing budget on radio and podcast ads. Using audio channels for a visual product might sound counterintuitive—but Errett says she wanted people to hear from her as a mom and entrepreneur. “We believed our audience would hear the authenticity in my voice,” she says. “We also knew our female demo was listening while driving to work and taking kids to school.”

A decade later, and Errett still stands by her theory—and she’s got the data to back it up. Unique promo codes allow the brand to track order origins, and Errett says that more than half of visitors to Madison Reed’s 80-plus salons say they discovered the brand after hearing her tell her story. And with \$220 million in funding, it would seem investors are listening too. —Rebecca Deczynski



# HOW TO OUTSOURCE YOUR ASSISTANT

In 2012, Craig Goodliffe needed an assistant to help him run his real estate and consulting businesses in Ogden, Utah. He posted a local ad for the job, but got a reply from a woman, Daphne, in the Philippines.

The Southeast Asian nation used to be a hotbed for telemarketers. As spam calls became automated, that infrastructure shifted to virtual assistant services. Despite a 15-hour time difference, Daphne proved ready to take on any and all of Goodliffe's tasks, and quickly became his best asset. In fact, so many people in his network expressed interest in finding their own virtual assistant that in 2018, Goodliffe launched a third company, Cyberbacker, to connect entrepreneurs with virtual assistance. Read on for tips on finding your own Daphne.

## • Use an Agency

Stefano Faustini, CEO of Brand of a Leader, and his co-founder, Marina Byezhanova, hired their Philippines-based assistant, Kate, through Outsource Access, an Atlanta firm that made Inc.'s inaugural Power Partner Awards list of B2B companies. Taking this route helped them avoid the burden of international payroll. "We don't have to worry about the tax implications," Faustini says. "For us, it's just a charge on our credit card."

## • Hire Like You're Dating

When Worxbee founder and CEO Kenzie Biggins pairs one of her clients with a remote assistant, she approaches the process as a matchmaker—in fact, she based Worxbee's matching methodology on Match.com's pairing model. "Your executive interview is usually your closest relationship,



besides your significant other," Biggins says. Her methodology assesses clients and assistants to align on soft skills—communication preferences, conflict resolution abilities, and even the gravitas needed to interact with other executives and investors.

## • Don't Be Cheap

U.S.-based assistants can make up to six figures. Goodliffe says the assistants his company provides from the Philippines typically cost about half that. But you get what you pay for, he warns, and advises entrepre-

neurs to work with an agency that offers fair wages and benefits like health care: "We have people who say, 'Well, other companies can hire someone for \$2 an hour.' I don't doubt it, but you won't be able to keep anybody." —Ali Donaldson



## Survey Says

**Q:** What interview question reveals the most about a candidate?

**A:** "Give me an example of where you differed in opinion from your last boss and how you worked through that together."

—LUKE WEST, CEO, RELIAS HEALTHCARE

The Future of ...

# TIKTOKS, TWEETS, AND TEEN GIRLS



Alexis Ohanian, co-founder and executive chair of Reddit.

When he co-founded Reddit in 2005, Alexis Ohanian could never have dreamed the social platform would eventually be worth \$6 billion. He just wanted people to share stories. Here, Ohanian reflects on the evolution of social media, and what's next for the industry.  
—Tim Crino

### How will social media change over the next decade?

I think as a society we're tapped out on the current model. I see it anecdotally and in the data, in terms of time spent and engagement. Social media was marketed as a chance to connect with people all over the world. But everyone is a brand online now. We're all performing in some way. Plus, we've seen how these algo-

gorithms metastasize the worst behavior and reward tribalism.

### Is that why people demand "authentic" content on TikTok?

TikTok is still hacking our brains. We're not connecting with anyone, we're just hamsters on the wheel trying to figure out how to get another reward. The success of BeReal, on the other hand, has reinforced my belief that the second wave of social

media will be driven by Gen-Z's fundamentally different mindset. BeReal is popular because Gen-Z does not want to be married to the phone experience. They want to live their life, get a push notification, and be like, "All right, I'm gonna use my phone now. *Click, click.* Let's share this moment. OK, cool. Now back to living my life." Teenage girls historically are the driving force behind all of these consumer social products—if you can build something that they're happy with, you can win.

### What do you think that will be?

The content could be a remix of a current format, like short-form looping video, or something truly novel. What needs to change is the business model. That's why I invested in Patreon, the subscription platform for creators. We need something decentralized—perhaps using the blockchain—that's not supported by advertising, where creators can be fairly paid for their work and own their content. Someone who can build that will change everything.



### Survey Says

**Q:** What did you learn from the worst boss you've ever had?

**A:** Don't do cocaine.  
—AARON WARNER, PROCIRCULAR

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How I Got the Idea

## HOLDING THE LINE

Chaitenya Razdan wasn't sure what to expect when visiting loved ones in a cancer ward back in February 2014. The founder and CEO of Care+Wear definitely didn't expect to see so many chemotherapy patients wearing socks on their arms.

The tube socks—toes snipped off—served as a rudimentary way for patients to keep their peripherally inserted central catheter lines in place. PICC lines thread through arm veins, typically, to deliver chemotherapy and other meds directly to a patient's heart. If those lines shift around, infection and blood clots can follow. Given the stakes, Razdan was shocked there wasn't a tidier option, or at least one offering a degree of dignity.

The serial entrepreneur got to work, collaborating with Johns Hopkins University and the University of Virginia to develop antimicrobial PICC line covers. By April, he had launched Care+Wear, with UVA as one of his first enterprise customers. Sales took off quickly from there, and Care+Wear began working with designers such as Oscar de la Renta and the Natori Company to add other fashionable and functional garments to its lineup. Along with PICC line covers in eight colors, from black to fuchsia, the company also makes clinical scrubs and adaptive hoodies that provide access to chest catheters.

Care+Wear now works with 90 hospitals and retails in nearly 1,000 CVS HealthHubs nationwide. The New York City-based company has raised \$5 million to date, and ranked No. 20 on the 2021 Inc. 5000. —Melissa Angell



Care+Wear co-founder and CEO Chaitenya Razdan helps a patient adjust a PICC line cover.



COURTESY SUBJECT (SHEA); COURTESY PUBLISHER (BOOK); SPOT ILLUSTRATION: TENG YU LAB



Pitch Perfect

## LET'S LOOK AT THE UGLY

As an angel investor, former partner at Kairos Ventures, and co-founder and managing partner of Divergent Capital, Katie Shea's \$6 billion portfolio includes companies like Parade, Real, and Bombas. She sat down with Inc. to tell us what she looks for in a pitch.

●● I think of myself as a talent scout rather than an investor. Over the years, I've identified a few characteristics and skills that tend to lead to success. One of the most important differentiators is motive. I'm not interested in founders who just like the idea of owning a business. I want them to be obsessed with solving a problem that they've spent a lot of time thinking about.

From there, I look at soft skills—three in particular. Most investors look for charismatic, magnetic storytellers. I look for them too, but I also look for the rare founders who are also very KPI-oriented and communicative. Some of my best-performing companies are run by founders who possess all of these skills.

That's why I ask founders who pitch me if they have any previous or existing investor

updates they can share. What's good, what's bad, whom have you hired, what are the business vitals? If they're willing to share that information, I'm more willing to invest—expecting that they'll continue to send monthly or quarterly updates on these metrics. Why? Because the companies in my portfolio that stick to this structure tend to be the most successful.

Take Self Financial, a fintech based in Austin. The founder, James Garvey, sends a weekly KPI report to all his investors. The company just raised a \$15 million Series E. He really does not need to do that. But I think sharing metrics on a regular basis with stakeholders, internal and external, forces accountability and honesty.

And speaking of honesty—don't share just the good stuff! I tell all my founders, "I'd rather have a more honest, productive conversation about what is keeping you up at night. What is going wrong? Send me those financials. It's my job to read them. Let's talk about what I think is good or bad, and the three big strategic decisions that need to get made in the next couple of months. Let's look at the ugly together."

—As told to Tim Crino

### Survey Says

**Q:** Do you have any recurring dreams or nightmares about your company?

**A:** Yes. Exploding beer cans.

—MARK STUHLREYER, CO-FOUNDER, MARCH FIRST BREWING

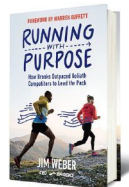


### The Best Parts

#### DO ONE THING, AND DO IT WELL

In 2001, I became Brooks Running's fourth CEO in two years. Employees had a pool on how long I'd last; most did not know bankruptcy was only a payday away. The 90-year-old company was over \$30 million in debt, and sixth or seventh in sales behind every other athletic brand—most of which had daily marketing budgets that dwarfed our annual spend.

My book, *Running With Purpose*, details the game plan I used to set Brooks apart. It all started with answering one question: Who are you for? At the



time, other brands featured epic athletic achievement in their marketing. We thought Brooks should be about supporting the average runner, and divested from everything except running shoes to create high-quality products at affordable prices.

Since then, Brooks has grown steadily—and last year earned a billion-dollar valuation—by sticking to that one simple mission. —Jim Weber

Mentorship Matters

## ACTUALLY, THE CUSTOMER COMES SECOND

In the mid-'90s, before its recent fall from grace, Southwest Airlines was famous for its company culture. That's why, when Chip Conley began forming the culture at his boutique hotel chain, Joie de Vivre Hospitality, he reached out to Southwest's co-founder for advice.



It was the management guru Peter Drucker who first said, 'Culture eats strategy for breakfast.' I've always taken that to heart, but when I was starting out, I didn't know how to build a culture—I just knew whom I wanted to emulate.

Southwest Airlines has always had one of my favorite cultures. It's weird, playful, joyful. The flight attendants dress up funny and crack jokes. I figured, why not try to get Herb Kelleher, Southwest's co-founder and CEO, on the phone and ask him a few questions.

I eventually got through to his executive assistant, who suggested I write Herb a letter. So I jotted a few questions down, one of which was, 'What's the biggest cultural mistake you've ever made? And how would you do it differently next time?' and sent them off to Dallas. Three weeks later, I got a letter back from Herb with all my questions answered. He also told me he really liked my questions, and offered to answer a few more in a year's time. We went on like that for about 10 years.

Though we never actually

### MENTEE

Chip Conley,  
founder of the  
Modern Elder  
Academy and  
Joie de Vivre  
Hospitality.



### MENTOR

Herb Kelleher,  
late co-founder  
and CEO of  
Southwest Airlines.

met, Herb's wisdom helped me build the culture at Joie de Vivre. He taught me that the customer always comes second. Whatever you're trying to deliver to your customers is not sustainable if your employees don't feel cared for. That's why, at Joie de Vivre, senior executives were expected to give two pieces of unsolicited, loving recognition to different colleagues every day.

Nowadays, when people ask me for advice, I'll usually say, 'Email me three questions.'  
—As told to Ali Donaldson

# Ohio Moves Business Forward



The future is being built in Ohio. Who thinks so? Intel, Honda, and Ford are just three of the technology innovators, global manufacturers, and distributors who chose to invest in Ohio — resulting in a capital expenditure upwards of \$31 billion and nearly 27,000 new jobs last year. Consistently ranked in the top 10 states to do business, Ohio empowers businesses with our sophisticated workforce, logistics-friendly location, and innovative strategies poised for growth.



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# Not the Impostor You Think You Are

*My first time on national television taught me a lesson we all could use about our self-worth: I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and, doggone it, I like me.*



REMEMBER IT like it was yesterday. About four years ago, I was leaving my home in Los Angeles, heading to Paramount Studios to do my first national television segment. As a therapist, author, and founder, I'm often asked to speak on issues relating to relationships and mental health. On this occasion, I was slated to appear on a now-defunct show called *The Doctors* to discuss therapists having relations with clients. It's fair to say I know about all manner of relationships. Plus, I had practiced for weeks on my talking points and knew exactly what I wanted to say. I looked in the mirror one last time before exiting the house. My outfit was amazing, my hair was perfect, my makeup was flawless. I was as ready and as prepared as I could ever be—but I still couldn't shake my feelings of dread. And, like many a founder before me, in just such a moment, my inner monologue grew more intense as the minutes passed:

*"Who do you think you are, going on national television as an expert?"*

*"Nobody wants to hear what you have to say."*

*"They got you because no one else was available."*

*"You're a fraud and the whole world will find out."*

I started to cry and ruined my makeup. I said a quick prayer, but even that didn't help much. I knew I needed to air my fears if I wanted to let them go.

I called a longtime friend and fellow entrepreneur, who also regularly speaks in public. He listened as I unleashed it all. But through my panic, I heard him say the words I knew to be true: *You deserve this; you're worthy; you're formidable.* He reminded me of the years of training and the 3,000 hours I'd spent counseling before I could call myself a therapist. He reminded me of the families I've helped and marriages I've saved since getting my license. He wiped away every drop of negative self-talk I had in me.

His last words to me before getting off the phone were, "You've got this!" He was right. I did have this. Up to this point, I had counseled hundreds of people, spoken on stage to thousands more, written books, and appeared on local television. I had done "scary" things before, and I had been successful.

Even so, after doing the national television seg-

ment and after being invited back multiple times, I knew I had more work to do. I did not want my inner bully to keep knocking me down every time I was confronted with a big opportunity. So I did what anyone who is serious about growth does—and what any founder who's serious about leading should do: I started to process my anxieties with my own therapist. Yes, even therapists have therapists.

Roughly 84 percent of founders report battling impostor syndrome, according to a 2020 study by Kajabi, a platform for creators. And through my own therapy, I was able to trace my bout of impostor syndrome to grad school, where a professor once told me I'd never be a good therapist. Those words had lodged in my subconscious, and, at some level, I'd come to believe them. They'd crept into my business and my relationships with family and friends. I didn't apply for opportunities because I didn't think I'd get them. I secretly thought I wasn't helping clients reach their goals, even though their results said otherwise. I projected my limitations onto my friends and discouraged them from pursuing things they were capable of. I didn't challenge family members who told me what I should be doing with my life.

Clearly, though, I was deserving and I sure as heck knew what I was talking about that day on national television. But here's the thing: Those pangs of self-doubt don't go away—for me or any other entrepreneur. While my friend managed to talk me down, and my therapist supplied me with the tools I needed to overcome doubt, flare-ups return. And they will for you, too. No matter how many supply-chain crises you've solved or boardroom battles you've settled, or the funding you've raised, you won't believe you're worthy overnight. Managing impostor syndrome requires reminding yourself of your greatness. It also requires a strong support system.

Above all, you have to be willing to do the work. Part of that is not waiting until you're tearing up before a stage appearance or, *ahem*, going on national TV. If there's something in your past that's blocking your future success, don't delay dealing with it. You owe yourself more than that. After all, you deserve this. You're worthy. And you're formidable. 📌



**Kiaundra Jackson**, a marriage and family therapist, is founder of KW Couples Therapy, a private L.A. practice. She is also a noted author, speaker, and co-founder of Black Speakers Rock, a network for emerging voices.

# In Customer Service, Talk Isn't Cheap, but It Is Essential

*When you erase your phone number from your website, you erase your reputation.*



IT NEVER CEASES to amaze me how the same companies that gladly fork over vast sums of money to marketing agencies to “build their brands” then go to such extraordinary lengths to undermine them. How difficult is it to part with a few more pennies and actually do the right thing, when it pays off in spades?

If you want to keep your good name, and keep those five-star recommendations coming (and why wouldn't you?), then it's vital to keep your customers happy when they ask for help. And that includes some good old-fashioned conversation between one human and another.

Years ago, I paid a sh\*t-ton of money for a top-of-the-line, commercial-grade faucet with a three-function spray head. For *ambitious home chefs*, the company said. Eventually, that faucet malfunctioned, and although it carried a lifetime warranty, at that point it was more than five years old. I dreaded calling customer service, because I fully expected to be told I was out of luck. Instead, I was immediately directed to exactly the person I needed to talk to. He was pleasant, apologetic, and seemed genuinely interested in my problem. Within days, I received a new fixture, free.

And, because I shared my positive experience with more than a few people, the brand got itself an unpaid ambassador. Thank you, Kohler. That's how word-of-mouth works, and it's very effective.

## Keep the Avenues Open

My faucet experience was unusual, even then. But I suspect it would be unheard of today, thanks to the widespread penchant for shaving pennies everywhere. Frontier Airlines recently made headlines for eliminating its telephone customer service, instead requiring customers to converse with boxes on a screen. In the airline's investor presentation, the justification was revealed: Actual human calls were characterized as “unscalable, inefficient, and expensive.” Not only that, the presentation went on to say that those phone calls left open an “avenue for

customer negotiation.” Imagine that!

Frontier isn't alone. More and more companies want to cheap out on talking with customers by hiding or eliminating their phone numbers on websites. A recent *Wall Street Journal* poll found that 41 percent of respondents said they couldn't find a phone number on a company's site. After all, it's so much easier (read: cheaper) to connect via chatbots. Despite data to the contrary, corporate spokespersons typically claim, “Most customers prefer communicating through digital channels.”

That last remark brings to mind a line from the John Candy comedy *Armed and Dangerous*, spoken by a dimwitted security guard in training: “Let's say somebody's lyin', right? And you know they're lyin'. Can you shoot 'em?”

We all love to complain about our flying experiences (hello, Southwest), but now we have the added pleasure of “customer experiences” that leave us fuming long before we get to the airport. A colleague here at my investment firm, Unorthodox Ventures, recently tried to tweak an existing flight but was billed for multiple flights he didn't book, thanks to the website. Fortunately, he was able to reach a person who resolved the issue quickly. I wasn't so lucky in my own attempt to change a flight by a day. The concierge service promised by my credit card proved useless. Six hours of calls cost me six days' allotment of patience.

Luckily, we still have a degree of choice over which airline we fly—at least in some markets. That's how capitalism is supposed to work. Companies compete for customers, which includes building loyalty with good service. This shouldn't be an adversarial relationship, yet thanks to the almighty spreadsheet, that is what it's rapidly becoming.

Companies assume customer service is there to deal with unhappy people. They also assume unhappy people can't be made more happy, so it's not worth the cost of trying. But in my experience, that's just wrong. Providing quality customer service is just as important as manufacturing quality



Big Ass Fans founder **Carey Smith** led the fan and light maker from \$0 to its \$500 million sale. Along the way, the company made the Inc. 5000 for 11 consecutive years. Today, his investment firm, Unorthodox Ventures, focuses on finding small companies with big potential.

products. When you skimp, you hurt your top-line revenue long-term and compound your profits problem. One Bain & Company report found that, in financial services, a 5 percent boost in customer retention yielded a fivefold increase in profit.

### Lost Patience Can't Be Recovered

Overreaching cost-cutting has long been the MO at private equity firms. (Shocker: A PE firm has a controlling interest in Frontier Airlines.) But it's not only PE. Every company is just one tightfisted CFO away from the bad hangover caused by short-term cost reductions. People who experience bad service will find an alternative. Maybe not this week, or next month, but eventually. Companies seem blind to the future revenue they're risking compared with how little it costs today to keep people happy.

Smart founders focus on ways to increase revenue—or, at least, look at less anger-inducing ways to reduce costs. Sure, I might be annoyed that my favorite candy company gives me fewer chocolates per package, but that's much more palatable than wasting my time by being put on hold for hours.

If you really can't figure out a way to operate profitably, consider raising prices. That's a tough call, but you want the quality of your service to match your customers' expectations. Remember, people will pay for good products and good service—think Mercedes-Benz or Ritz-Carlton. And you should realize too that there's more to business than making as many bucks as possible. Take pride in your company and invest in it.

Providing good service comes down to the Golden Rule: Treat customers as you'd want to be treated. Ask yourself, do you want to spend hours with a chatbot or on hold, or do you want to speak with a human who can quickly solve your issue?

At the company I founded, Big Ass Fans, we aimed to treat customers better than we had any expectation of ever being treated. We didn't view the customer as someone out to make trouble; for us, the customer really was always right, especially when they told us what we were doing wrong.

Consider the case reported by Inc.com of a Lego customer who forked over some \$350 to buy a Star Wars compound—the Mos Eisley Cantina. Means nothing to me, but StarWars.com describes it as a “dimly lit tavern known for its strong drinks, hot tunes, and occasional outbreaks of shocking violence.” So I can understand the appeal of building it from tiny, sharp-cornered plastic blocks that have an uncanny ability to find the soft underbelly of a parent's unshod foot in the middle of the night. But I digress. They're wonderful toys.

Their customer service is wonderful too. When this customer discovered a bag of pieces was missing, he contacted Lego. And guess what: Lego answered him, not only quickly, but also cordially and humorously—while at the same time taking responsibility: “I am so sorry you are missing bag 14 from your Mos Eisley Cantina!” the email read. “This must be the work of Lord Vader. Fear not, for I have hired Han to get that bag right out to you.”

That's how you do it. Don't argue with the cus-

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## Companies assume customer service is there to deal with unhappy people. They also assume unhappy people can't be made more happy.

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tomers. Maybe the customer misplaced the bag. But nothing is to be gained by suggesting that. You do what it takes to make customers happy—and, if possible, make them laugh—and what you get in return is a great reputation and a stellar brand.

### No One Ever Cost-Cut Their Way to Greatness

We've all been taught that crime doesn't pay. Well, neither does cost-cutting. It's criminal in its own way and almost always leads to trouble. Remember the 737 Max, when Boeing tried to reduce retraining costs? The pandemic pushed that story out of the limelight, but it should remain front and center in any business discussions. Closer to my old home in Lexington, Kentucky, one well-known fish-and-chips chain endured losses at multiple restaurants because of fires due to overworked frying equipment. Eventually, the grease caught up with them. A penny saved is a penny burned.

Efforts to eliminate human contact in customer service will ultimately backfire too, as people seek more satisfying experiences elsewhere. And replacing those customers is expensive, with studies suggesting it costs from five to 25 times as much to acquire a new customer as it does to retain one.

The point here is clear: You don't need to make a profit on every sale. A satisfied customer is going to bring in far more business in the long run through positive word-of-mouth than any amount of advertising. And, most of the time, it costs only a few bucks to make a customer happy.

I call that money well spent. 🍌



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MAGAZINE.

## Burn It All Down

*How we lost our headquarters and engineering lab in a fire—and gained a lot more in the process.*



Icon is on fire.”

The phone call woke me in the early morning of the day after Thanksgiving, Black Friday.

Even though it was still dark out, I had enough mental clarity to know that our COO meant it literally and not figuratively.

“How bad is it?” I asked.

“Bad.”

All told, two buildings—our headquarters and our engineering lab—were destroyed by the fire, along with almost everything inside them. Just days earlier, we had made headlines when we announced we were building one of the largest communities of 3-D-printed homes in the world, in partnership with one of the nation’s largest developers, Lennar, and one of the world’s top architectural firms, Bjarke Ingels Group. And we were planning to make an equally large announcement in just a few days more: a \$57.2 million contract with NASA to develop technologies capable of printing infrastructure on the moon. We’d all gone home for the holiday with a little extra swagger in our step—and now this. It was a gut punch.

Inside the buildings—where dozens of us had worked daily to develop technologies to help us attack the global housing crisis—were the many and various tools of our trade: architectural plans, computers, vacuum chambers, lasers, material samples, and our primary indoor engineering test stand. There was also a lot of sentimental stuff from the five years we had been in business: mementos from the journey, the first 3-D printer we ever built, notes from customers, early prototypes and experiments that became the foundation for today’s major projects.

As I made my way to the scene of the fire and the burned-out husk of Icon’s former home, my thoughts were a blur of tactical priorities. Are we absolutely sure no one was in the building? Can our projects continue? Where will everyone work tomorrow? Will this make customers lose faith in our ability to deliver? Did we lose an important design or insight for the next-generation printer?



**Jason Ballard** is the Austin-based co-founder and CEO of Icon, a construction-technology company focused on 3-D-printed buildings.

Is it a PR crisis if a construction-technology company’s headquarters burns down?

And then, as I transitioned into thinking about the way forward and how our business would be affected in the big picture, the view quickly sharpened. Gut punches hurt, but they won’t kill you. You can pretty quickly catch your breath, find your balance, and fight on.

Fortunately, nearly our entire fleet of printers was deployed in the field for paying customers. Fortunately, no one had been in the buildings when the fire started, since the day before had been a holiday. Fortunately, most folks had brought their computers home for the holiday. There was no reason that we couldn’t keep going, and quickly.

We sent out word that everyone was to report for work on Monday morning at one of our construction sites, our test pad, or the factory where we build our giant printers. And, with zero drama, everyone showed up and got back to work.

I didn’t tell folks where to sit, I didn’t tell teams where to hold their meetings. That they didn’t miss a beat wasn’t just a testament to their resilience. It was also the first hint of what I would learn in the coming weeks about how quickly any organization, even a fast-growing one, can cling to systems and structures it doesn’t always need.

### An Amazing Thing Happened

When you’re in the business of 3-D-printing homes, one of your most fundamental success metrics is the number of linear inches printed per day, because speed and scale are the keys to this technology’s impact. And, in spite of the fire, the following week would prove to be the most productive week of printing in the history of our company, to that date. We printed more in the next two days at the 100-home Lennar site in Georgetown, Texas, than we had the prior full week.

We mostly associate fire with destruction and tragedy and danger. And, as we learned on that day in November, those impacts are undeniably true. Still, throughout human history, fire has had

another equally powerful meaning: purification.

I began to realize that instead of getting sucked into the vortex of sorrow, frustration, and loss, we could see this as a moment of renewal. A question hung in my mind: If we could lose our HQ, our engineering lab, and so many things that had meant so much to us—things that we thought we had to have—without any measurable impact on the outcomes that mattered most to Icon, then what else could we change? Perhaps the fire had more work to do.

For me, the first target was my time. Time is the most limited resource that each of us has—and that's especially true for founders. As one might expect for the CEO of a fast-growing early-stage company developing breakthrough technology, my calendar had become full of standing meetings with direct reports, review meetings with product teams, board calls, investor updates, sales pipeline reviews, and more. I started each week with 90-plus percent of my time already spoken for.

A schedule like that kills creativity, improvisation, responsiveness, learning, and clarity. But I had to have all these meetings, right? CEOs have to write investor updates. They have to meet with sales teams every week to keep the tempo up. They have to understand nuanced technical issues deeply and in real time. They have to do those interviews and tell the company story. Right? But in the wake of our blaze, I soon realized I had been serving my calendar, when my calendar should have been serving me.

Inspired by the fire, I decided to burn it all down. I deleted every meeting from my calendar and started over. Out were meetings that had grown in scope and lost a clear purpose. In were only those focused on the things we considered most important to Icon going forward. As of this writing, I don't believe I have ever been more focused, more creative, or more in a position to make good judgments and be a good human.

### A New Mantra

"Burn it down." That's the line I began repeating—in staff memos, in all-hands meetings, in executive huddles and planning sessions. "Burn down your calendar. Burn down your standing meetings. Burn down your org chart. Burn down your customer leads. Burn down your product road maps. Burn it all down." What I meant was that the fire was not just a tragedy, but also an opportunity. It was an opportunity for our company to escape organizational inertia and to rebuild our work, our plans, and our ways of being—using everything

that we had learned on our journey.

We so often do the things we do simply because that's how we've always done them. We allow our prior approaches to constrain our future. But the best possible future will emerge from the best possible thinking, and the best possible thinking emerges from the fusion of core principles, actual experience, and creativity.

And so, during the month after our fire, our company discovered so many things that we didn't need: We didn't actually need those buildings, we didn't need to do that project, we didn't need to maintain those old printers anymore, and we don't need to ship all of those features in the next release. But

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## It was an opportunity to escape organizational inertia and to rebuild our work, our plans, and our ways of being—using everything we had learned.

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also, in "burning it down" and resetting, we discovered things we did need: We needed regular cross-functional collaboration, we needed exactly those features on the printer that would lower cost and increase speed, we needed to focus on that project because it represented exactly why we exist—and so on. It would be hard to measure the positive impact of the fire, but it could easily be an eight-figure number in the first year.

Of course, you don't have to wait for a real-life tragedy to gain the benefit of this approach. Just run the following mental exercise: What if a fire burned down your whole company and you lost everything—actually everything? Every product. Every building and piece of equipment. Every payroll record and org chart and customer contract. Everything. What if you had to rebuild your business on the basis of everything you know now? What if you could shape your organization more on where the world seems to be headed than where it was yesterday? What if you weren't tied down to buildings, meetings, customers, processes, or products that you didn't need anymore?

Maybe it's time to burn them down. Maybe it's time for a strong dose of purification. Because it's always time for more focus and clarity. **G**

  
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# Block Shop Textiles has shunned investors for a decade. Good thing Kendra Scott knows how to grow a bootstrapped business.

By Kevin J. Ryan

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The jewelry entrepreneur helps Hopie Stockman, co-founder and CEO of the home goods and apparel brand Block Shop Textiles, foster a culture of sustainable growth.

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HOPIE STOCKMAN NEVER met a craft she didn't like. Growing up in New Jersey, Stockman and her three sisters would spend hours painting, knitting, and sewing. During the summer, they went to weaving camp together. "We were always obsessed with highly specific artistic processes," says Stockman, 38.

In 2013, Stockman and her sister Lily turned their passion for crafts into a business by partnering with a co-op of block printers Lily had met in India. The sisters launched Block Shop Textiles in Los Angeles, specializing in home goods and hand-block-printed apparel made using centuries-old methods. Today, the eight-person company works with

small textile mills, printers, and weavers in India, Italy, and the U.S. to create everything from robes and scarves to curtains and table linens. And though Stockman spent five years as a consultant at the investment firm Cambridge Associates in Boston, she decided against raising capital to fund her business.

Kendra Scott, for her part, knows a thing or two about being bootstrapped. A college dropout who began working in retail when she was 14, Scott founded her eponymous jewelry company in Austin in 2002 and waited a decade before raising capital. In 2016, she sold a minority stake to a private equity firm in a deal that valued the company at \$1 billion. Scott transitioned from CEO to executive chair in 2021, but continues to be hands-on at the company, while also investing in the next generation of entrepreneurs.

"I love mentoring, especially at this stage of my career," says the 48-year-old Scott, who has backed small businesses as a guest on ABC's *Shark Tank*.

Both founders have made their mark through style—and *in* style—so Inc. recently brought Scott and Stockman together at Block Shop's new showroom in Los Angeles to talk about customer service, work-life balance, and the art of keeping products fresh.

**STOCKMAN** My company's core values are joy, compassion, and creativity. While it may be easy to keep those values at the center of your decision-making when you're our size, how do you do that when you're a billion-plus-dollar company?

**SCOTT** That is my most important job as founder: keeping the culture and the core values. You need to keep them in mind with every decision you make. Someone can have a gold-plated résumé and all the experience in the world, but if she does not fit our core values of family, fashion, and philanthropy—if those things are not at her core—we do not hire her.



DESIGN-FORWARD  
Hopie Stockman  
(left) and Kendra  
Scott both rely on  
creativity to fuel  
long-term growth.

## Founder to Founder

**STOCKMAN** I love that. So you were self-financed for the first 10 years. What was the hardest phase of growth?

**SCOTT** When the recession hit in 2008, we were strictly a wholesale business selling to retailers. All the power was in the hands of the store owners who were carrying my goods. When all these retail stores started closing, it forced us to reexamine our business. We knew we were going to have to do something differently if we wanted to save our company, let alone grow it.

**STOCKMAN** So what did you do?

**SCOTT** At the time, I didn't have a direct connection to my customer. I knew I

wanted that power back. I wanted to be the only line of jewelry in the showroom. So we opened a retail store in Austin and our own little showroom in New York City. That gave us the chance to hear what our customer loved, what she hated, what she wanted more of. Sometimes, you have to shake the snow globe. Before that, we were growing, but we weren't skyrocketing. It was safe. We were paying our bills.

**STOCKMAN** That's how I feel right now. We're safe.

**SCOTT** After we opened those stores, we saw lightning-in-a-bottle growth. I say this to a lot of entrepreneurs: Look at your competitive landscape and really

know everything about it. Then ask yourself: What's our X factor? What's going to let us build our own sandbox? Because if you're doing what the rest of them are doing, you've already failed.

**STOCKMAN** That's a great point.

**SCOTT** We opened a store where jewelry was freely displayed on the table. It was fun, it was relaxed. There was no pressure. And it worked. We had lines out the door. We already had a strong product and great partners. Now it was time to build this fun infrastructure on top of that foundation. In your case, you clearly have built this great foundation. So now it's time. Go and build the dream.

**STOCKMAN** I feel so inspired! We're also mostly direct-to-consumer. We have a close relationship with our customers. Does your company have a customer service philosophy?

**SCOTT** We have a three-word mantra: the sister rule.

**STOCKMAN** Tell me everything.

**SCOTT** I worked at larger retail stores in high school, and the customer service handbook was a thick book of rules. *This is how you deal with an exchange. If it's past 10 days, do this; if it's 30 days, do this.* When I was building my company, I knew I didn't want that, so we created a rule: What would you do for your sister in that situation? If she had a broken necklace, you'd fix it. Why not handle every interaction like that? If someone has one earring but lost the other one, we'll give them 50 percent off for a new pair. I tell my staff in our stores, I don't care if somebody doesn't leave with a yellow Kendra Scott bag today. I care that they leave happy, that they leave with a smile.



CREATIVE MBA  
Stockman went to B-school, but says she still thinks like an artist.





#### CUSTOMER-OBSSESSED

When it comes to learning from customers, “we have a mentality of never being complacent,” Scott says.

brand identifiers. We’ll offer them in new colors or new stone materials. You might have all these styles that you consider vintage, but a huge majority of your customers have never even seen them.

**STOCKMAN** I recently got married, and my husband and I are hoping to start a family. You have six kids and you run a billion-dollar business. What phase of motherhood was hardest for balancing growing the business and having kids, and what’s your advice around that?

**SCOTT** I started my business as a new mother. My oldest son was 3 months old when I began going store to store in Austin selling my jewelry. I had this small team of women as my employees. We always had employees’ babies in the office. It was part of our culture. We created this village of family first. I trust that the other moms and dads who work in my organization are going to get their job done. It doesn’t mean that you have to be in a seat from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. We schedule meetings and create in-office days on the basis of people’s family dynamics. I’ll kick my people out the door and be like, “You’re gonna be late for Noah’s soccer game. Get out of here!”

**STOCKMAN** That’s great.

**SCOTT** And it goes both ways. Everyone knows that at 6 o’clock, I am with my family, having dinner, and doing homework. A lot of times, I get back on at 9 o’clock after I tuck my youngest into bed, but unless the building is burning down, dinnertime is my time. There’s no need to choose between being a parent and running a business anymore. You can have it all—because you create the culture. There will be peaks and valleys, both as a founder and as a parent, but that’s what makes us stronger and makes us closer to the people around us. That’s a beautiful thing. 📍

**STOCKMAN** This is so good.

**SCOTT** If someone walked into our store and made a connection to our brand, and they felt that warmth, joy, and love, they’re going to share it with other people. They may go online and buy something they saw or come back to the store. We’re creating customer loyalty by creating a connection in a retail store. That’s how retailers need to think. Within those four walls, it’s a brand experience opportunity, as opposed to a transactional opportunity. Connection before transaction, and the transaction will follow.

**STOCKMAN** I have a feeling you’re someone who’s big on feedback. What is your feedback culture and how do you implement it?

**SCOTT** Every person at the company has a direct communication line to me. We’re at 2,600 people, and they all have my email address and cellphone

number. I want to know what’s going on. I want to hear the good and the ugly. The people who work in my stores are the most important people in the company, because they’re the ones engaging and interacting with my customers every day. So I’m like a sponge. “You’re out in the field. What are you hearing?” I’ll ask. “What are our customers saying about the experience, the product design?”

**STOCKMAN** You have a great core product offering. How do you keep that fresh and relevant as you continue to grow?

**SCOTT** We’re always adding. There are always new collections coming out. But I eventually realized that I was changing every season—everything new, every season—and some of our customers still wanted some of our signature styles. I was letting winners die before they were done living because I thought it had to be fresh all the time. So we’re putting new things out, but also giving our customer the things she loves that have become



IDEAS

# Brian Chesky

As told to Christine Lagorio-Chafkin

The co-founder and CEO of Airbnb thinks like a designer, nurtures his curiosity, and pumps a lot of iron.

WHEN BRIAN CHESKY moved to San Francisco after college, he and then-roommate Joe Gebbia sold air-mattress space on their floor to raise rent money. Within a year, they had a ticket to Y Combinator, and soon they were adding listings in more than 500 cities. By 2014, their startup was Inc.'s Company of the Year. Revenue soared to \$4.8 billion by 2019. And then came trouble. • In early 2020, the pandemic hit hard, eliminating 80 percent of Airbnb's business in eight weeks—and putting its imminent IPO in peril. But Chesky, the CEO, reorganized and regrouped, taking the company public in December 2020 at a more than \$100 billion valuation. With that behind him, you might think he'd take a victory lap. Instead, when we caught up with him at the end of 2022, he was reflective.

## 1 NURTURE YOUR INNER HELLION

I was a disrupter before that was a good term. In elementary school, I'd find myself in the principal's office for "disrupting" the class. I was very much into fun pranks, and I loved public speaking and performing and creating things. I did tons of extracurricular activities, too. I think founders need this insurgent spirit. The extracurriculars, creating things, the pranks—these are all proxies for entrepreneurship.

## 2 HARNESS YOUR STRENGTHS

I still draw today, and I think of myself as a designer more than as a businessperson. On paper, I'm a businessperson, but what I'm really doing is designing a company. I think you need that distinction, because in entrepreneurship, as in design, you have to remain curious to keep your mind open to the next big idea.

## 3

### TAKE CONTROL OF A CRISIS

During Covid, things felt like they were moving four times faster, so you had to communicate four times as much. And the psychology of the organization is really important. People were like, "Oh, my god, why us?" And I said, "No, it's not 'Why us?' It's 'Watch us. This is our defining moment.'" You can change your psychology—and you should, because the psychology of the leader becomes the psychology of the organization.

## 4

### VALUE PEOPLE OVER DATA

I think metrics are great, but you need to know what they mean. Metrics without context are a problem. And, remember, most metrics are of people. You've got to be careful about people becoming numbers, and getting emotionally detached. The second-best antidote to that is talking to your customers. The best antidote is *being* the customer. You have to put yourself in the customer's shoes.



**MAKE TIME TO WORK OUT**

One thing I try to do each day is exercise. I think this is important for entrepreneurs. It's easy to say you're too busy to work out, and then you don't exercise, and then your energy level goes down so you're actually less effective. Weirdly, making time to exercise, you gain time.

## 6

**STAY IN TOUCH IRL**

The single best thing I've found for mental health is avoiding isolation. We're increasingly disconnected. People are not going to offices; they don't go to church. They're spending more time in digital communities, but those aren't always as nourishing. Your Instagram friends aren't really going to help your loneliness.

## 7

**KNOW WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW**

Being a founder is totally intuitive. You don't have to learn to be a founder—you just start. Being a CEO is something you have to actually learn. Part of what I've spent the past 10 years doing is learning how to be a CEO. The trick is to inspire people to care, to think of their job as more than a 9-to-5.







S



H  
PLAYER



A  
PITCHMAN



Q  
BUILDER.

How Shaquille O'Neal, founder and investor,  
made himself bigger than ever.

BY WILL LEITCH • PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTIAN CODY



## haquille

O'Neal knows what you're thinking. You see him on the cover of this magazine—wearing a suit, looking dapper and professional—and as much as you like him, you're also groaning a little bit. *Another superstar athlete presenting himself as a business genius.* It is, after all, fashionable among athletes to parlay one's sports dominance into a global conglomerate, to show that one is as preternaturally gifted in the boardroom as on the basketball court. It's almost obligatory at this point.

But do you really believe it? Maybe you think O'Neal just needs something to do with his time. He's a brand name: He'll do some endorsements, and, hey, good for him. But a serious entrepreneur? Shaq? The guy from Fu-Schnickens? Come on.

O'Neal knows you think this. He might even agree with you.

"I'm not the smartest guy in the room," he tells me, once, twice, a total of 11 times over the span of our conversations. "I'm not coming in here telling people what to do. I'm not trying to run a business. I'm not an investment guy. When I was younger, I would put a million in something and get nothing back. It was just gone. I knew I had a lot to learn. I still do."

This has been O'Neal's thing for decades: Even though he is a 7'1", 300-plus pound basketball Hall of Famer and one of the most recognizable humans on the planet, he insists that he is just like the rest of us—no better, no worse.

And to be sure, O'Neal's approach to business, at least until recently, has looked like a holdover from an earlier era of celebrity business that was rooted in sponsorships, endorsements, and licensing deals. But a new model has appeared in

recent years—led by LeBron James and carried forward by Kevin Durant, Patrick Mahomes, and others—that's less about being a smiling pitchman and more about building empires. Durant's venture-capital firm, 35 Ventures, was one of the earliest investors in Postmates and Coinbase. James's production company, SpringHill, has a \$725 million valuation. The conventional wisdom holds that O'Neal, by comparison, is just cashing checks.

But then you take a closer look. Consider the sheer number of companies that O'Neal owns a piece of, often a substantial one: Papa Johns, Five Guys, Krispy Kreme, Auntie Anne's. The connected doorbell company Ring, well before Amazon acquired it in 2018 for north of \$1 billion. Even Google, all the way back in 1999, long before its IPO, when it was valued at only \$100 million. (Guess he didn't lose it all on that one.) O'Neal has opened more than a hundred franchises—car washes, health clubs, restaurants—around the country. He founded a film production company, Jersey Legends, and won an Oscar with a documentary about women's basketball great Lusia Harris. He founded a marketing agency called Majority that has created

most promising one, has been Big Chicken, a fast-food chain that he founded in Las Vegas and has now expanded to 14 stores in 7 states, and will open four more this quarter alone. (That's not including the Big Chicken restaurants that have opened on all Carnival Cruise Line ships.)

O'Neal's estimated net worth, \$400 million, makes him one of the world's wealthiest athletes. And his doctorate from Miami's Barry University (dissertation: "How Leaders Utilize Humor or Seriousness in Leadership Styles") makes him one of the most underestimated. "The guy has a sixth sense," says Jamie Salter, CEO of Authentic Brands Group. "Give me 10 more just like him."

O'Neal dismisses such talk about being gifted, or having a unifying theory of business. "I just want to learn," he says. "It's very simple. When you talk to people smarter than you, it enhances your intelligence. I do things with people I like who are smart. It's not complicated. I don't know why people make it so complicated."

And while it's true that he may not be poring over every line on a balance sheet, O'Neal is more intentional in his work than he would like you to believe. In fact, his



**WHEN YOU TALK TO PEOPLE SMARTER THAN YOU,  
IT ENHANCES YOUR INTELLIGENCE. I DO THINGS WITH  
PEOPLE I LIKE WHO ARE SMART. IT'S NOT COMPLICATED.**



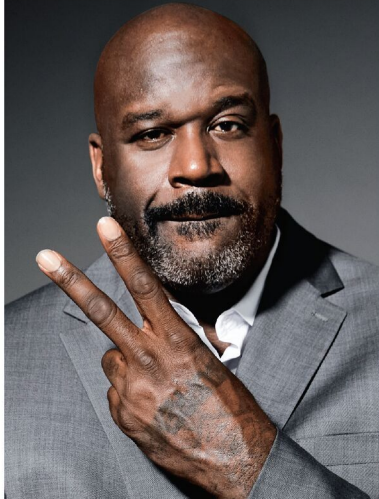
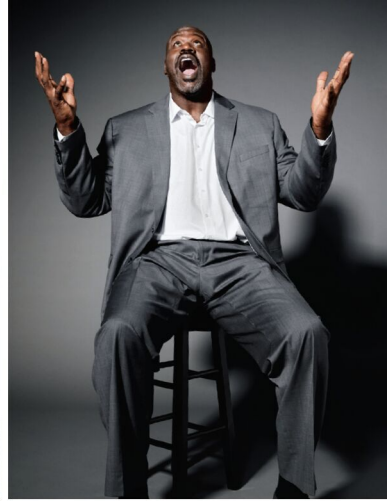
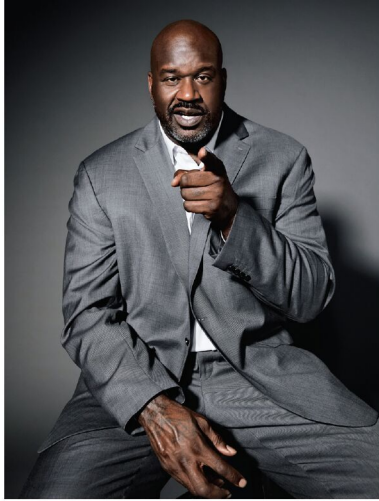
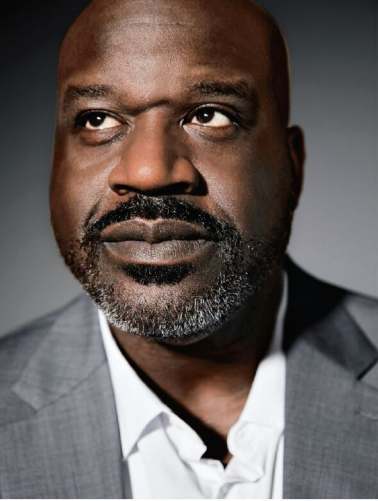
campaigns for clients including Sprite, GM, and the CDC.

There's more—and how he even remembers them all is downright Clintonian. Among O'Neal's most ambitious ventures has been helping turn Authentic Brands Group—a holding company that before O'Neal arrived in 2015 was mostly known for representing the estates of deceased celebrities such as Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe—into a global player. The firm now owns some 50 major brands, including Brooks Brothers, *Sports Illustrated*, Aéropostale, and Reebok (the last of which it acquired explicitly at O'Neal's behest). His biggest success, or at least his

business philosophy is remarkably consistent, despite a wild variety of ventures. It's a way of thinking about opportunities and leadership that holds lessons that are applicable to everyone, even those who do not rise to 85 inches above the earth.

## Follow your heart

Every person who has dealt with O'Neal declares some variation of the same thing: *He's like a big kid.* Four different people told me tales about him pouring his frame into some sort of oversized vehicle and driving it through a crowd of shocked and delighted onlookers. His relentlessly playful attitude was a staple of his playing career as



well; more than a couple of his coaches memorably grouched about it.

O'Neal is incapable of being anyone other than himself—and while that could have been a limitation, he has turned it into a strength. There is no clear motif among his business interests, no through line other than his involvement. What he brings to them is passion—a genuine drive to be involved. “I’ve got a routine with this stuff,” O’Neal says. “Any company I start or get involved with, I’ve got to have three things. First, I’ve got to have a real interest in the product. Second, it’s got to be something that I can see will help people. And, maybe most important, I’ve got to enjoy doing it.”

Take his involvement with the General, an insurance provider that has been around since 1963 and offers low-cost car insurance to high-risk clients, such as people who have had recent accidents. You might know the company from its low-budget TV ads with a poorly computer-animated singing “General”; you may have seen them while viewing an old *Jerry Springer* episode at 2:30 in the afternoon. When O’Neal was approached by American Family Insurance in 2015 for a potential endorsement or partnership, he discovered that the company had bought the General a few years earlier.

“That’s what I wanted to be involved with,” O’Neal says. “It was the only insurance I could afford in college. I didn’t know what the hell insurance was. My dad told me I had to get it for my car, and everything was 300 bucks, and I didn’t have 300 bucks. So they gave me insurance for \$29, full coverage. There are more regular people than there are spoiled rich people like me. The most important thing I focus on is affordability, because not everybody has the means that I have. I didn’t always have all this. Most people don’t.”

O’Neal isn’t trying to impress the business elite with what’s in his brand portfolio. He’s worried about what the brands offer customers. “I was watching Maury Povich when I saw the commercials, too,” he says. He legitimately cares about the General because he remembers legitimately needing the General. It’s impossible to fully measure O’Neal’s halo effect on the business, but the company revamped its ad strategy in 2021 to double down on his humor and star power. Now *Inside the NBA* co-hosts Kenny Smith and Ernie Johnson, Jr. among other Shaq



Clockwise from top left: O’Neal introduces his Big Chicken concept to Carnival Cruise Line; a Twitter post for Krispy Kreme; O’Neal and the General; delivering pizza for Papa John’s, where he sits on the board; serving soup for the Original Soupman.

friends, appear alongside him in the ads.

Big Chicken’s origin story also draws on O’Neal’s early years. Shaq grew up in New Jersey, Germany, and Texas in a strict but loving household run by his mother and his drill sergeant stepdad (his biological father was out of the picture). Some of his warmest memories involve sitting around the table after church, eating chicken, and spending time with family. It was something he always wanted to provide to others, and that notion led to his founding the restaurant chain, along with CEO Josh Halpern.

“One of Shaquille’s top values is authen-

ticity,” Halpern says. “He sought to create a concept that felt like him. He’s the number-one shareholder. You go into one of our stores, and it feels like him.” There’s a sandwich named after O’Neal’s bodyguard, called the Uncle Jerome, and one called the Big & Sloppy, a reference to his *Inside the NBA* co-host Charles Barkley. That one, O’Neal jokes, “is a sloppy sandwich for a sloppy guy.” It’s just the sort of crack he would level at Barkley on air.

Salter notes that in many ways, Big Chicken is the ultimate encapsulation of O’Neal’s brand. “It’s about value and fun,” he says. “Big Chicken is, at its core, what



Shaq likes to eat. That's the best chicken sandwich you'll ever have, because it's his mother's recipe." And he keeps the price at an approachable level.

O'Neal has life stories that connect to all the businesses he has created or invested in. He invested an undisclosed amount in Ring technology because he was thinking about security for his family's home. He partnered with Authentic Brands because he wanted to make sure his family was taken care of after he died—"like they did with Elvis." It might seem seat-of-the-pants—O'Neal just picking things he personally likes—but, ultimately, picking things he likes is the whole point. The brand of Shaq is nothing if not authentic.

Put another way: It's a lot easier to succeed when you don't have to pretend to have faith in what you're doing. It's a lot easier when you care.

## Know your limits

Back when O'Neal was still playing for the Los Angeles Lakers, he happened to use the same financial adviser as Starbucks founder Howard Schultz. One day in 1998, when the team was in Seattle for a game, Schultz called him. "Shaq, do you want to do a Starbucks in the 'hood?" he said.

"The way he put it kind threw me off," O'Neal recalls today. "My response to him was, 'Black people don't drink coffee.' Nobody in my family drank coffee. I thought it wouldn't work. He offered me equity in the company plus 10 to 15 coffee shops starting in L.A. After I told him no, he went to Magic Johnson—and Magic got the deal." When Johnson sold his Starbucks stock in 2010, he made \$100 million—\$100 million that he poured right back in his other businesses. "Which I would have done," O'Neal says with a sigh.

That experience changed O'Neal's approach. Before the Starbucks miss, he had stuck to straight endorsement deals, wherein he simply got paid to show up and cut a commercial. After Starbucks, he pursued partnerships and equity deals—to make sure he always had a stake in any place he worked with. Even more important, O'Neal says, the missed Starbucks opportunity taught him to "make sure I've got my smart people with me at all times."

One of O'Neal's greatest skills as a businessperson might well derive from his belief that he's not great at it himself: He finds people who know what they're doing and stays out of their way. With Big

Chicken, he says, he knew generally what he wanted: an affordable chain restaurant with homey food that could serve as a place to gather. The details beyond that needed to be hashed out, so he found people who could do that—at a company called JRS Hospitality, which has long operated restaurants in the Las Vegas area (where the first Big Chicken was introduced). Halpern says O'Neal gets especially involved with marketing strategies and franchise sales. "And he reaches out directly to franchisees and suppliers when we have issues," he adds.

In turn, O'Neal sends all the credit right back to the team. "Those guys are smarter than me," he says. "I don't have yes people around. I trust them, and I'm there when they need me." He also holds them to the same standards he sets for himself. "I don't make the same mistake twice," O'Neal says. "I make sure my people know that, too."

As amusing as it might be to picture O'Neal ambling into a boardroom and sitting in a chair that's too small for him, surrounded by people half his size, he is by all accounts a regular, active participant at the board meetings of his companies. "He's a listener," says Colin Smeeton, president



**ANY COMPANY I START OR GET INVOLVED WITH, IT'S GOT TO BE SOMETHING THAT I CAN SEE WILL HELP PEOPLE. AND I'VE GOT TO ENJOY DOING IT."**



of Authentic Brands Group West Coast and a longtime business associate of O'Neal's. "He'll never not entertain something. He learned from that Schultz experience. He doesn't dismiss anything."

And, Halpern adds, "he asks tough questions. He's good at poking, at finding the things we haven't thought enough about, absorbing the data and information that comes at him, and making decisions based on it. It doesn't surprise me anymore."

Salter tells the story of how O'Neal bugged him incessantly to acquire the shoe brand Reebok, which had sponsored him early in his basketball career but had fallen on harder times since his retirement.

Adidas bought the company in 2005 and had since drained it of its unique identity. O'Neal felt strongly that the name was an underutilized asset and saw an opportunity to give it new life, just as he'd helped do with the General. Salter thought it was a bad idea and told O'Neal so over and over. But when the opportunity finally presented itself in early 2022, Salter pounced, partly just to get O'Neal off his back. Since then, Reebok has released several throw-back Shaq shoes and gotten sneakerheads buzzing with pop-up vintage stores in New York City and a licensing deal with DC comics. Authentic Brands' Shaq-engineered takeover of Reebok happened in March 2022, only one year ago, but the brand already enjoys a relevance it hasn't had in decades.

"He was, of course, right," Salter says. "That's going to end up being one of the best deals I've ever made. He knew it, too. He just knew it in his gut."

## Understand your value

In 2018, Papa Johns was in trouble. Then-president and CEO John Schnatter had been forced to resign after the company's poor financial performance the year

before (which he blamed on kneeling NFL players) and after he'd used a racist slur during a conference call. The pizza chain's revenue took a dive throughout 2018, including a 20 percent drop in the final quarter. It was a brand in crisis.

The company saw a potential solution in O'Neal and approached him that summer with a clear pitch: They needed someone everyone knew and loved, and all the better that he was one of the most famous Black celebrities in the country.

O'Neal knew exactly where he stood—so he demanded part of the company in return. "Shaq said, 'Look, we've got to give people a reason to believe in a brand

again,” says Smeeton. “He tells them, ‘If I’m going to take this risk, if I’m going to be the first minority on your board, I want to be involved on the highest level. I want to put my money where my mouth is.’ It was a huge step for him in his evolution. He started Big Chicken not long after that.”

O’Neal joined the Papa Johns board of directors in March 2019, and it didn’t take long for him to start putting his stamp on the place. He designed a Shaq-branded pizza, called the Shaq-a-Roni, that is essentially a super-size pepperoni pizza whose sales support underserved communities. A dollar from every Shaq-a-Roni sold goes to the Papa John’s Foundation, which in turn distributes the money to local organizations focused on hunger relief, reducing food waste, and other causes. O’Neal also began operating some franchises himself and showing up in Papa Johns ads. He became the most visible representation of Papa Johns. No one sees John Schnatter’s face when they think of Papa Johns anymore; they see O’Neal’s. By the fourth quarter of 2019, revenue was back up 3 percent. And by the third quarter of 2021, Papa Johns brought in \$513 million in revenue, an all-time high. It had been just over two years since O’Neal joined.

“Shaquille understands how to connect with people, which has been a real asset as the board and leadership team have all worked to strengthen our brand, our culture, and our franchise system,” says Papa Johns president and CEO Rob Lynch. “At his core, Shaquille is an entrepreneur.” O’Neal could have just taken a check. Instead, he understood what precisely he could bring to the company—how he could help with its recovery while doing well for himself.

## Have fun out there

As O’Neal talks about this personal journey, several photographers maneuver around him taking his picture, a support staffer constantly hands him plates of food, and a makeup artist does a little touchup work around his eyes. I’ve caught up with O’Neal today in Atlanta while he does a daylong video shoot for Carnival Cruise Line, another of his many brand partners.

Anyone deciding to renew their vows with their significant other on a Carnival ship this Valentine’s Day was about to find that a video of Shaq would officiate the ceremony. (He’s Carnival’s chief fun officer.) Between stopping for photos and

answering questions from a pesky reporter, O’Neal decides to loosen up the extended crew by playing his “Get the White people in the room going” playlist on his phone—a lineup of ‘90s pop songs from the likes of Ace of Base, Alanis Morissette, and Sinéad O’Connor. (His lip-sync of “Nothing Compares 2 U” is really something to see.) He does his first run-through of the Carnival ad in one take, and when he’s done, he leaps in the air and pumps his fist: “Now that’s how you do a f—in’ commercial. One-take Shaq, baby! I’ve come a long way since *Kazaam*, right?”

He is, in short, having the time of his life. “You have to let him have fun,” Smeeton says. “It’s the only way any of this happens.” Smeeton used to try to rein O’Neal in, but he’s since learned better. He points to the star’s DJ business as an example.

O’Neal regularly travels to music festivals and clubs to play shows as DJ Diesel and cut loose in a way that you won’t see in, say, the Carnival Cruise video. He doesn’t turn a profit on the DJ work—flights alone sometimes cost twice what he earns for a gig, he says—but the experience provides the energy that drives everything else. “I miss the roar of that crowd, and DJ’ing is the only thing that gives it to me,”

world of celebrity endorsements and entrepreneurship, is that it’s fun being Shaq, and we all want to be around people who have fun being themselves. O’Neal can come up with an idea that might sound eccentric—chicken like at my parents’ place! Let me live forever like Elvis! Insurance like what I had as a kid!—but he comes at it with such genuine enthusiasm and curiosity, such irrepressible Shaqness, that it transforms into something that others believe in. At one point, he told me an idea he’s been thinking about: “gum that never loses its flavor.” That sounds crazy to me, and I now expect O’Neal to start a company that makes gum that never loses its flavor. He has a way of getting people to come along with him. “He’s a unicorn,” Smeeton says. “There isn’t anyone who doesn’t want to get in a room with Shaq.”

In a rare down moment, I ask O’Neal what he sees as his ultimate goal. Where is this all going? What is he building? “I’ve got enough money,” he says. “I’ve got enough stuff. I just want to go until I can’t go no more.” He pauses for just a second, takes a breath. “I never panic. I see opportunities. I’m having fun. I’ll go find some more, and have some more fun. That’s who I am. That’s all I can be.”



**I DON'T HAVE YES PEOPLE. I TRUST THEM. I'M THERE WHEN THEY NEED ME. AND I DON'T MAKE THE SAME MISTAKE TWICE. I MAKE SURE THEY KNOW THAT, TOO."**



he says. “I do one of those shows and I’m ready to get back to work.”

Smeeton argues the side gigs help the wider Shaq brand. “I told him it would be a time suck, it would tire him out,” he says. “Wrong again. It’s one of the smartest things he’s done. He’s broadened his fan base, become more relevant, in a different demographic. That’s just him knowing himself, knowing what he needed.”

And that is essential to understanding Shaquille O’Neal. Call it the Tao of Shaq. The undeniable joy of being yourself. The reason O’Neal is seen as authentic, the reason he has navigated the changing

Maybe O’Neal doesn’t think of himself as a great entrepreneur. But what is an entrepreneur other than someone who is open and curious, who understands their own value, who is willing to look past steep odds, who assembles and empowers a team? What is an entrepreneur but someone who inspires other people to come along for the ride? What is an entrepreneur but someone who can’t help but seize opportunities—and then use them to create even more? **Q**

WILL LEITCH is the author of six books and the founder of the sports website *Deadspin*.





## MEET THE NEXT BIG THINGS

**THESE ARE THE FASTEST-GROWING COMPANIES IN THEIR REGIONS—AND LIKELY CONTENDERS FOR THIS YEAR'S INC. 5000. THEY'RE STILL SMALL FIRMS—BUT THEY'RE PROPELLED BY BIG, MARKET-WINNING IDEAS.**

**I**n a nation full of enterprising minds, it's not hard to find burgeoning businesses in every state. The 2023 edition of Inc. Regionals recognizes the resourceful business owners in each region of the U.S. who have smashed their own records again and again as they chart turbo-powered growth. It's a local take on the Inc. 5000, honoring outperforming entrepreneurs

from the Pacific Northwest to the booming Southeast, and everywhere in between. To make the cut, these companies had to show a minimum of 60 percent revenue growth over two years. Many skyrocketed over that bar—like Dallas's Blue Hammer Roofing, a contracting business that nailed a 13,946 percent revenue increase. Now that's raising the roof.



While the Inc. 5000 looks at the growth of private U.S. businesses over three years, Regionals tracks the past two years and allows lower revenue to qualify: \$100,000 in 2019 and \$1 million in 2021, years that weren't easy for companies of any size. Inflation reached 11 percent, pandemic policies and supply chain struggles persisted, and ever-shifting consumer demand

was the rule. Still, the 1,125 companies honored this year went beyond coping with these challenges; by generating \$64.1 billion in revenue and adding more than 100,000 new employees, these businesses exemplify innovation and resilience, while playing outside roles in bolstering the U.S. economy. Keep your eye on them, and draw your own lessons from their remarkable stories.



Includes AL, AR, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, PR, SC, and TN

Americans are flocking South. Fueled by such booming Sun Belt cities as Atlanta, Nashville, and Miami, the Southeast's population increased 10 percent from 2010 to 2020, more than any other region's. It's also home to the queen of Regionals, health care staffing platform SnapNurse, which grew more than 34,000 percent.

## How I Built an IT Business That Proves I Belong

### LaunchTech, No. 3

#### Huntsville, Alabama

#### Venus Quates, founder and CEO

**Two-year revenue growth:  
5,121%**

*Venus Quates, 43, grew up in a single-parent household in inner-city Buffalo, New York, where her smarts got her into a college prep school. While most of her classmates went off to Ivy League colleges, Quates decided to follow in her grandfather's footsteps and join the Air Force. She spent four years working in information management in locations such as South Korea, Italy, and Saudi Arabia, and then landed a job at the aerospace firm General Dynamics. Throughout her 15 years working technical jobs, Quates was often the only Brown woman in the room and constantly felt like she was underestimated. That motivated her to quit her job and start her own technology solutions company in 2016. The leap would lead to more obstacles and—eventually—resounding success.*

●● I started LaunchTech out of my bedroom back home and lived off my savings while I tried to get customers. In the early days, I had different

aliases when I spoke with potential clients: I would adopt a British accent and pretend to be an assistant; I would mention Bob in accounting. None of these people existed. It was all me.

A year in, I was on my way to an SBA class and my car got rear-ended. I had to go through vestibular therapy to regain my balance. I used to be a fast talker, but now I have to take a moment and choose my words. Until now, I've told only a few people that this happened to me. My mind is what makes me money, so I'm insecure about people knowing. But I think it's important for me to deal with it.

Not long after the accident, my spouse and I abruptly got divorced, and I was left with next to nothing. Recently, I was scrolling through photos and saw a screenshot of a bank statement from around that time: My account had negative \$270.

At that point, LaunchTech served as an outsource tech department, helping a few smaller clients upgrade their systems or providing IT support. I had a few part-time workers, and paid my mom to be my receptionist.

I kept hustling, trying to earn bigger contracts. In 2018, we won one with the

state of New York to provide IT solutions at a workforce training center. It was my first real contract, but I had underbid myself and it wasn't enough money for me to hire the people I needed. Lesson learned. Eventually, we earned contracts with the Air Force, the Department of the Army, and New York City's Metropolitan Transportation Authority, and I could finally hire people. Today, we have 28 employees.

We moved our headquarters in 2021. I love Buffalo, but it's not easy to find people there who have experience doing business with the government. Huntsville has one of the highest rates of government spending, but it's way cheaper than places like D.C. It was a great decision.

Sometimes, I still feel like I need to go overboard to prove that we're the best, because we're run by somebody who looks like me. At my last job, I was a data storage engineer for a bank and worked on the third floor. When I got in the elevator in the morning, somebody would usually press two for me—that was where most of the people of color worked, in the cafeteria. My team was all White males and me. When our vendors came to visit, they would pass business cards out to everybody except me, proba-

BY  
THE  
NUMBERS

200

Companies

174%

Median Growth

OWNING IT  
Venus Quates  
leveraged her  
military experience  
to win government  
contracts.



bly because they thought I was a secretary.

I founded LaunchTech because I wanted to start a company that would be so successful you couldn't deny that we're intelligent enough to do what we're doing. Our last year in Buffalo, we were No. 1 in that city on the Inc. 5000 list. Our first year in Huntsville, we were No. 1 here. There's no denying us anymore. It doesn't matter if I'm the only Brown person in the room or the only woman in the room. I know I'm supposed to be there."

—AS TOLD TO KEVIN J. RYAN



## Top 25 Southeast Companies

### 1. SnapNurse

Atlanta, Georgia  
Health Services: 34,007%

### 2. simpliHÖM

Brentwood, Tennessee  
Real Estate: 5,574%

### 3. LaunchTech

Huntsville, Alabama  
IT Services: 5,121%

### 4. iBuyXS

St. Petersburg, Florida  
Business Products & Services:  
4,856%

### 5. Elite Business Strategies

Tallahassee, Florida  
Government Services: 4,281%

### 6. SureLock Technology

**\$10.3B**

Total Revenue 2021

**25,844**

Jobs Added



TO SEE THE REGION'S FULL RANKINGS,  
GO TO [INC.COM/SOUTHEAST](https://inc.com/southeast).

## SOUTHEAST

Lawrenceville, Georgia  
IT Services: 3,986%

7. **RateForce**  
Atlanta, Georgia  
Software: 3,491%

8. **Dan-O's Seasoning**  
Louisville, Kentucky  
Food & Beverage: 3,072%

9. **MyFBAPrep**  
Sunrise, Florida  
Logistics & Transportation:  
2,886%

**"Don't be afraid to say no. Being measured in what we agree to do for our clients has allowed us to stay true to our roots and our brand, and to deliver the high quality of service and customer experience we pride ourselves on as a company."**  
—Co-founder & CEO Tom Wicky

10. **IDEAL AGENT**  
Tampa, Florida  
Real Estate: 2,721%

11. **PrizePicks**  
Atlanta, Georgia  
Sports: 2,704%

12. **M. Gordon Publishing Group** Tampa, Florida  
Media: 2,192%

13. **J2 Company**  
Jackson, Tennessee  
Construction: 2,087%

14. **AMA Consulting Group**  
Winter Park, Florida  
Government Services: 2,024%

15. **Alliance Global Advisors**  
Naples, Florida  
Financial Services: 1,696%

16. **C&H Precision Weapons**  
Richmond Hill, Georgia  
Manufacturing: 1,606%

**"Like a lot of founders, I was everything in the early days: boss, bookkeeper, customer service rep, salesperson, marketer, machine**

**operator, janitor. When I started hiring, I focused on people I could afford, thinking I could train them to be better. It didn't work out well. Eventually, I started hiring candidates I felt I couldn't afford but who had the right skills and experience. Each time I did, they were great at their job, which allowed me to focus on what I was good at—and in turn that resulted in higher revenue and better profits. I started repeating that concept over and over again. Today, I find myself in a position of having few day-to-day responsibilities so instead I can focus on the 3-, 5-, and 10-year plans."**  
—Founder & Owner Buck Holly

17. **Print Your Cause**  
Mount Pleasant, South Carolina  
Software: 1,583%

18. **Inception**  
Louisville, Kentucky  
Logistics & Transportation:  
1,500%

19. **Supplement Pass**  
Duluth, Georgia  
Consumer Products: 1,426%

20. **Codoxo**  
Atlanta, Georgia  
IT Services: 1,412%

21. **Outsource Access**  
Atlanta, Georgia  
Business Products & Services:  
1,337%

22. **1nHealth** Orlando, Florida  
Health Services: 1,326%

23. **ULTRAVIEW ARCHERY**  
Norcross, Georgia  
Consumer Products: 1,111%

24. **HCM Unlocked**  
Miami, Florida  
Human Resources: 1,094%

25. **Fountainhead**  
Lake Mary, Florida  
Financial Services: 1,063%



## MID- WEST

BY  
THE  
NUMBERS

# 203

Companies



**FAMILY JEWELERS**  
It took two years for Tammy and Jake Nelson to prototype their fidget rings.





The Midwest has earned its reputation for rearing hard-working folks. Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Nebraska boast some of the lowest unemployment rates in the U.S.—below 3 percent. Entrepreneurs in this industrious heartland are busy launching health care technology startups, scaling logistics providers, and rethinking the insurance industry.



TO SEE THE REGION'S FULL RANKINGS, GO TO [INC.COM/MIDWEST](http://INC.COM/MIDWEST).

**160%**

Median Growth

**\$22.9B**

Total Revenue 2021

**22,750**

Jobs Added

## How My Son and I Created a Jewelry Brand by Not Giving Up

**CONQUERING, No 11**

**Milford, Ohio**

**Tammy Nelson, co-founder and CEO**

**Two-year revenue growth: 1,326%**

*Growing up in Wisconsin, young Tammy Nelson dreamed of becoming a professional dancer in New York City or L.A. Despite the slim odds of any girl making it in that rarefied realm, her mother only ever expressed complete belief in her daughter. Though Nelson, 52, ultimately exchanged her tap shoes for a successful career in marketing, she's always looked for ways to harness the fearlessness her mother instilled in her to make others feel just as supported as she did. That led her to build her fidget ring brand, which she runs as a side hustle with her son, Jake. It is now one of the fastest-growing jewelry businesses in the land, and No. 478 on the 2022 Inc. 5000. But first they would have to fuss over the ring's fidget mechanism.*

●● My mom instilled in me an unequivocal belief that anything is possible. I always thought that everyone must think that way, but over the years I realized that most people don't. My mom gave me that gift. After she passed away from brain cancer in 2010—too young, in her 50s—I set out on a mission to spread that feeling of empowerment.

In 2011, I launched a line of motivational-quote key chains. It was fairly successful, but I felt like it wasn't totally effective. So, in 2018, when Jake was 19, we started brainstorming a product that people could interact with every day. As fidgeters ourselves, we landed on rings.

He designed a 3-D prototype out of paper, which we converted into digital art and 3-D-printed at the Cincinnati Public Library for 20¢. But it would be nearly two years until we launched our first rings. Our biggest pain point—and our biggest factor of success—was the interchangeable design of our rings.

I made piles and piles of

prototypes trying to get the two parts to click together perfectly. People love spinning, but even more than that, they love to click—just as they click a pen or tap their fingers. It's a really satisfying feeling. I was close to calling it quits, but Jake—bless his heart—said, 'No, Mom, you told me from the start this was the number-one most important requirement. We're not giving up.' The mechanism turned out to be very intricate, so we hired an engineer to figure it out. Then, we secured a utility patent for our design. I searched for companies that make Disney's enamel pins, and found our manufacturer that way.

We launched in January 2020. Jake suggested we get on TikTok, and we had our first viral moment that August. It completely sold us out, and I had to drive to every Michaels in town to buy jewelry boxes. Then he went back to college for his senior year, and I had to figure out how to run our TikTok business myself.

Since then, we've had lots of viral moments on social media, especially TikTok—once we sold about \$40,000 worth in one day—but they are feast or famine. In 2022, with my son working on the business full time, we built our own email and SMS lists, expanded to Pinterest and YouTube, started doing paid ads on Google, and moved into retail. That's allowed us to reliably plan our inventory and hire the right number of people. Now, viral moments are icing on the cake.

I work on CONQUERING at nights and on weekends—by day, I'm a marketing executive at an Inc. 5000 insurance company. And while it's challenging to balance both, the business is my passion. Working with my son, we have to find ways to separate business from mother-son mode more, but it's been one of my greatest joys. It's given us so many opportunities to be together, while working on something so rewarding."

—AS TOLD TO REBECCA DECZYNSKI



## Top 25 Midwest Companies

### 1. **Hardbody Supplements**

Lenexa, Kansas  
Consumer Products: **22,379%**

**"At this point, nothing that we've faced has been unexpected. If anything, we've**

**learned to expect the unexpected. It's most important to work hard and develop relationships with people who have good intentions."**

—Co-founder & CEO Law Payne

### 2. **Hardbody Coaching**

Lenexa, Kansas  
Health Services: **21,397%**

### 3. **Capital i**

Springfield, Missouri  
Government Services: **5,714%**

4. **1440** Chicago, Illinois  
Media: **2,378%**

5. **CDL 1000** Chicago, Illinois  
Logistics & Transportation: **2,127%**

6. **TransLoop** Chicago, Illinois  
Logistics & Transportation: **1,974%**

**"When it comes to customers, you need to do what you say you're going to do. It sounds so simple, but we reiterate that on a weekly basis. Being ethical, straightforward, and proactive with your customers is the only way to be successful in our industry, and, really, in life."**

—Founder & CEO Nick Reasoner

7. **Associated Logistics Group**  
St. Paul, Minnesota  
Logistics & Transportation: **1,824%**

8. **QualSights** Chicago, Illinois  
Software: **1,821%**

9. **Clearcover** Chicago, Illinois  
Insurance: **1,447%**

10. **Camillus Staffing**  
West Des Moines, Iowa  
Human Resources: **1,401%**



# MID



# ATLANTIC

### BY THE NUMBERS

# 142

Companies

# 149%

Median Growth

# \$3.9B

Total Revenue 2021

# 14,439

Jobs Added

## How I Covered a Packaging Mistake to Rescue Our Company Before Launch

**Brutus Bone Broth, No. 15**

**Owings, Maryland**

**Sue Delegan, co-founder and CEO**

**Two-year revenue growth: 860%**

*The week that Brutus Bone Broth, a pet food maker, launched in May 2018, co-founder and CEO Sue Delegan, 44, was recovering from a double mastectomy. The surgery was preventative, a decision taken after she learned that she carried the BRCA2 inherited gene mutation, which put her at high risk for breast cancer. Despite the operation, Delegan was overseeing shipments from the warehouse to Wegmans, displaying the sort of resilience she would need to overcome a major*

*packaging misstep—one that boiled down to a single missing word. She and her sister and co-founder, Kim Hehir, 50 (who had endured the same surgery), had to act fast to save 200,000 units of product—not to mention the startup itself.*

●● We had shipped our labels to the New York director of agriculture in Albany. We were co-packed in New York and were launching there. So when the state received our labels, we were in full-on production. Our manufacturer in Minnesota was making the broth, our aseptic packaging was being produced in Sweden—it's the gold standard of sterilized packaging—and everything would get shipped to New York to be packed. We were filling 200,000 units of this pack-

## MIDWEST

### 11. CONQUERING

Milford, Ohio  
Retail: **1,326%**

### 12. Paragon Freight

Burr Ridge, Illinois  
Logistics & Transportation:  
**1,228%**

### 13. Market Wagon

Indianapolis, Indiana  
Food & Beverage: **1,058%**

### 14. Focused Labs

Chicago, Illinois  
Business Products & Services:  
**1,043%**

### 15. Native Pet

St. Louis, Missouri  
Consumer Products: **1,012%**

### 16. Collectiv

Chicago, Illinois  
IT Services: **994%**

### 17. Autobooks

Detroit, Michigan  
Software: **907%**

### 18. Vizex

St. Louis, Missouri  
Construction: **888%**

### 19. Lifeboost Coffee

Noblesville, Indiana  
Food & Beverage: **866%**

### 20. Elizabeth Rosario Law

Wyoming, Michigan  
Other: **834%**

### 21. Rheaply

Chicago, Illinois  
Software: **827%**

### 22. Shãctee Engineering

Woodridge, Illinois  
Engineering: **747%**

### 23. TheMathCompany

Chicago, Illinois  
Business Products &

Services: **718%**

### 24. Kwikly Dental Staffing

Minneapolis, Minnesota  
Health Services: **717%**

### 25. Cybervation

Dublin, Ohio  
Business Products & Services:  
**654%**

The fastest-growing startup in the Mid-Atlantic, which encircles the nucleus of the federal government, is—you guessed it—a government contractor in Northern Virginia. But this vibrant region, which includes the thriving research triangle in North Carolina and the corporate tax haven of Delaware, is not all buttoned-up businesses. Our list also contains a personal training program and an ice cream maker.



TO SEE THE REGION'S FULL RANKINGS,  
GO TO [INC.COM/MID-ATLANTIC](http://INC.COM/MID-ATLANTIC).



MRS. CHOW  
Sue Delegan  
named her  
company after her  
first rescue dog,  
Brutus. She's had  
many since.

# MID-ATLANTIC

aging with our bone broth, which we infuse with glucosamine and chondroitin for hips and joints. I was sitting at my desk, making sure everything was ready to go out on time, when New York's agriculture director called. He said, 'You cannot say 'with glucosamine' on your label. It has to say 'with added glucosamine.' Our packaging was en route from Sweden to New York and he told us we couldn't use it.

The first thought that went through my head was, 'That's it. We're out of business before we even started.' I took a deep breath, hung up with him, and called my brother; he's a mentor to me since he also owns a business. He told me that this was not the end, to not give up, and that this was just one of many roadblocks.

Then I called my sister, Kim, and said we needed to work around this problem. We had to quickly come up with a solution to avoid losing about \$125,000. We bootstrapped the company and this was most of our money, which we had dumped into our first production.

At first, we thought we could donate the product, write it off, and raise more money. But that didn't make sense financially. The other thing we thought about was scrapping the product and chalking it up as a loss—but again, financially, it didn't add up. And it would have pushed our launch back by three or four months.

Within about two hours, we had this aha! moment: What if we keep the packaging, but make it so that 'with glucosamine' is not visible? That's when we started thinking about products with stickers that say 'new,' like they've just

been thrown on.

One facet of our company is philanthropic, and we had forged a partnership with Project K-9 Hero, a national organization for retired police and military working dogs. So we decided to make stickers that said 'Project K-9' with its logo, and use them to cover 'with glucosamine.' I called the state regulator back and he said he would accept it.

We had to find a company to print the stickers and hire extra labor—basically around the clock—to put these stickers on 25,000 units. It took weeks and pushed off our launch by about a month. A lot of new business owners would probably have completely rolled up in a ball and wanted to quit. But for us, it's always about getting things done."

—AS TOLD TO MELISSA ANGELL



## Top 25 Mid-Atlantic Companies

1. **COREONYX**  
Herndon, Virginia  
IT Services: **4,326%**

2. **CleverProfits**  
Annapolis, Maryland  
Financial Services: **3,053%**

3. **ISI Elite Training**  
Charlotte, North Carolina  
Health Services: **2,997%**

"I think the one thing that I see is that some founders learn really fast that you've got to get the right people in the right seats to essentially collapse the timeline of success. I think some founders

don't notice that fast enough."  
—Founder & CEO Adam Rice

4. **Grant Leading Technology**  
Riverdale, Maryland  
IT Services: **1,941%**

5. **hyrUP** Washington, D.C.  
Human Resources: **1,735%**

6. **The Frozen Farmer**  
Bridgeville, Delaware  
Food & Beverage: **1,503%**

7. **PGLS (Piedmont Global Language Solutions)**  
Arlington, Virginia  
Business Products & Services: **1,453%**

8. **Earth Right Mid-Atlantic**  
Lynchburg, Virginia  
Energy: **1,405%**

"Always put the road down first. We have a tendency sometimes to drive on the road before it's put down and figure things out. If I'd known it would go this fast, I would have laid the interstate instead of just the side roads."  
—Owner & CEO Corey Argentinio

9. **Samtek**  
Aldie, Virginia  
IT Services: **1,292%**

10. **Instant Teams**  
Rehoboth, Delaware  
Human Resources: **1,055%**

11. **Croixstone Consulting**  
Charlotte, North Carolina  
Business Products & Services: **1,030%**

12. **Hoodsly**  
Denver, North Carolina  
Retail: **979%**

13. **Windsor Group**  
Bethesda, Maryland  
Government Services: **961%**

14. **Summit Human Capital**  
Richmond, Virginia  
Human Resources: **942%**

15. **Brutus Bone Broth**  
Owings, Maryland  
Consumer Products: **860%**

16. **Sierra7**

Falls Church, Virginia  
Government Services: **853%**

17. **Copper River Infrastructure Services**  
Chantilly, Virginia  
Construction: **852%**

18. **Goldschmitt and Associates** Reston, Virginia  
IT Services: **773%**

"The management learning curve is significantly more painful and steeper than the growth curve. If your management, infrastructure, policies, and culture haven't prepared you for the next stages, fast growth quickly changes from success to failure."  
—Founder & CEO Marc Goldschmitt

19. **World Headquarters of Awesome**  
Raleigh, North Carolina  
Real Estate: **736%**

20. **Hite Digital**  
Rehoboth Beach, Delaware  
Advertising & Marketing: **729%**

21. **Mako Medical Laboratories**  
Raleigh, North Carolina  
Health Services: **725%**

22. **Digital Axis**  
Dulles, Virginia  
Government Services: **718%**

23. **RP Professional Services**  
Ashburn, Virginia  
Government Services: **691%**

24. **Nexford University**  
Washington, D.C.  
Education: **676%**

25. **Pie Insurance**  
Washington, D.C.  
Insurance: **673%**



# ROCKY MOUNTAIN



TO SEE THE REGION'S FULL RANKINGS, GO TO [INC.COM/ROCKYMOUNTAIN](http://INC.COM/ROCKYMOUNTAIN).

From Denver to Boise to Salt Lake City, the Rocky Mountains are buzzing with startup activity. The Silicon Slopes attracted many people fleeing dense coastal cities during the pandemic—and some have never left. The area has the growth to show for it. From 2019 to 2021, Utah's gross domestic product increased by 14.7 percent.

## BY THE NUMBERS

# 60

Companies

# 157%

Median Growth

# \$2.2B

Total Revenue 2021

# 3,399

Jobs Added

## How We Monetized Our Market-Research Mind-Meld

### GoodQues, No. 5

#### Denver, Colorado

#### Holland Martini and Maria Vorovich, co-founders

**Two-year revenue growth: 2,202%**

*Holland Martini, 32, and Maria Vorovich, 34, like to say that their brains couldn't be more different. As rising stars in the competitive world of market research, both shared a passion for distilling complex patterns into digestible business intelligence. But it was only by combining Martini's gift for identifying patterns in large data sets with Vorovich's instinct for storytelling that both could truly soar. As colleagues at advertising giant Grey Group, they pioneered a "human-centric" approach to market research, but were dissatisfied by the slow pace*

*of change at their company. So they struck out on their own, co-founding GoodQues, a self-described "anti-research" market research company, in 2019. But how do you scale a company built on pure chemistry?*

**Vorovich** Since day one, our mission has been to humanize research for both the participant and the client. Our work is still underpinned by surveys and focus groups, but we make that research experiential for the people who participate in it, and we translate the data from that research into actionable insights. Our insight reports read more like a steamy novel than an Excel spreadsheet, and we pride ourselves on personalizing every report we deliver. We've made reports in the form of animated videos, cookbooks, and bullet journals.

**Martini** One big challenge in market research is that we often need responses regarding sensitive topics that people might not feel comfortable answering truthfully. For example, we have a client that is launching a new sexual wellness product, and they wanted to understand how many people risk getting STDs in their sexual encounters. Instead of directly asking the focus group about something so personal, we found a viral Twitter post that said, "Condom sex is garbage just give me the STD." We introduced the tweet to the focus group and asked, "Who laughed at this?" By taking a human-centric approach to potentially risky behavior, we were able to determine that roughly 28 percent of respondents said it was relatable.

**Vorovich** In 2019, when we founded the company, we

started fresh—no clients carried over from our former jobs. In year one, most of our clients were family and friends or former colleagues who threw us a bone.

**Martini** One of our biggest clients early on, which really helped us get to the next level, was Bitstamp, the E.U.'s largest cryptocurrency exchange. Someone we worked with at Grey who knew our work took a risk on us as a young company, and we ended up working together for two years. It was a major calling card for us.

**Vorovich** Once we had a few projects under our belt, word started to spread about our approach, and we found ourselves very busy with some major clients. We needed to bring on employees, but we had to trust that they could execute on our vision. It's critical in

# ROCKY MOUNTAIN

such a high-growth stage of our business life.

**Martini** We realized that the best way for us to impart our unique approach to new employees was to be totally transparent about our business goals and our progress toward those goals. Not only that, but each of our 25 employees also has the power to weigh in on the company's trajectory. By giving our employees a sense of ownership regarding the company's direction, we can all operate with a unified, agreed-upon vision.

**Vorovich** The greatest challenge to scaling up is balancing the need for process with the desire for nonstop creativity. We want our team to retain an entrepreneurial spirit and fight the feeling of comfort in favor of excitement—but not so much that it overwhelms them. We hire and train before we need to so that we can grow and take on more projects in a sustainable way.”

—AS TOLD TO BEN SHERRY



## Top 25 Rocky Mountain Companies

1. **Gabb Wireless** Lehi, Utah  
Telecommunications: 3,189%

2. **Omni Interactions**  
Denver, Colorado  
Business Products & Services: 2,680%

3. **Blazy Susan**

Denver, Colorado  
Consumer Products: 2,582%

“When we were a very small team, the biggest challenge was supply chains. In 2020, I was in the warehouse wrapping pallets. Now I have 40 employees and management is the biggest challenge, because at some point you realize how much better you can do if everyone is firing on all cylinders, and how much even one low-performing person can slow things down.”  
—Founder & CEO Will Breakeil

4. **Legendary Lady Labs**  
American Fork, Utah  
Health Services: 2,574%

5. **GoodQues**  
Denver, Colorado  
Advertising & Marketing: 2,202%

6. **Izzard Ink Publishing**  
Salt Lake City, Utah  
Media: 930%

7. **Perigee Group** Boise, Idaho  
Construction: 866%

8. **Rocky Mountain West Insurance**  
Grand Junction, Colorado  
Insurance: 602%

9. **Lovevery** Boise, Idaho  
Consumer Products: 532%

10. **Red Aspen** Meridian, Idaho  
Consumer Products: 469%

11. **Poppins Payroll**  
Boulder, Colorado  
Software: 469%

12. **XOOR** Las Vegas, Nevada  
Software: 464%

13. **Ascent Payment Solutions**  
Boulder, Colorado  
Financial Services: 393%

14. **GCS Glass**  
Aurora, Colorado  
Consumer Products: 325%

15. **Arrive Health**  
Denver, Colorado  
Health Services: 324%

16. **Aroma Retail**  
Las Vegas, Nevada  
Retail: 316%

17. **LGCY Power** Lehi, Utah  
Energy: 287%

18. **Sheets & Giggles**  
Denver, Colorado  
Consumer Products: 282%  
“However much capital you think you need, you're wrong—high growth means high capital requirements, and you should capitalize your business accordingly.”  
—Founder & CEO Colin McIntosh

19. **Edison Interactive**  
Denver, Colorado  
Software: 261%

20. **zLinq** Denver, Colorado  
IT Services: 224%

21. **DevReady**  
Englewood, Colorado  
Software: 217%

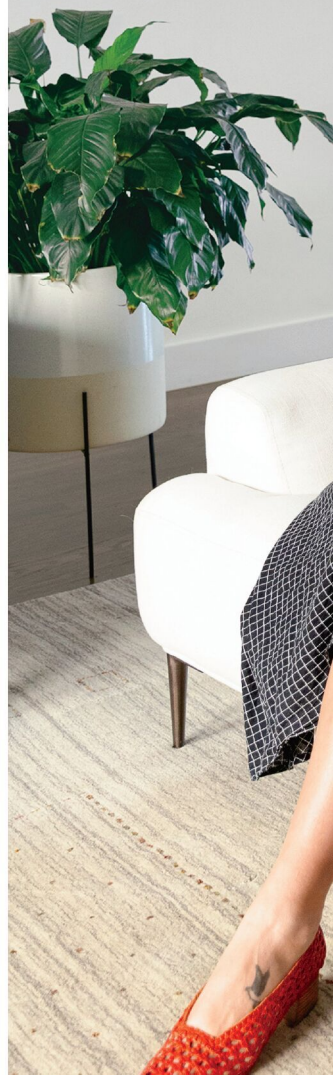
22. **Ziggi's Coffee**  
Mead, Colorado  
Food & Beverage: 205%

“The main unexpected lesson that fast growth taught me is the sheer amount of corporate-level support needed to be successful. We needed about twice as much support than I originally thought, and it has taught me to not underestimate the value that a quality team contributes to the overall success of our business.”  
—Co-founder & CEO Brandon Knudsen

23. **Lendio** Lehi, Utah  
Financial Services: 202%

24. **RDM Infinity**  
Carson City, Nevada  
Software: 195%

25. **Manly Bands** Lindon, Utah  
Retail: 189%





**DOUBLE VISION**  
Holland Martini  
(left) and Maria  
Vorovich take a  
different approach  
to market  
research.



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Includes AK, CA, HI, OR, and WA

Considering the world-class talent pipelines at Stanford and the University of California system, and the venture capital epicenter in Silicon Valley, it's no wonder California continuously ranks as the state with the most entrepreneurs. But the Golden State doesn't get all the glory. Fast-growing startups are popping up across the region in such cities as Seattle, Honolulu, and even Bend, Oregon.

BY  
THE  
NUMBERS

185  
Companies

179%  
Median Growth

## How I Reinvented Fresh Produce

**Lettuce Grow, No. 11**

**Los Angeles, California**

**Jacob Pechenik, co-founder and CEO**

**Two-year revenue growth: 1,665%**

*Jacob Pechenik, 50, had founded and exited three companies by the time his then-partner, actor Zoëy Deschanel, was pregnant with their first child. As many do in such circumstances, the family adopted healthy eating habits—only to be astounded by the cost of organic produce, and disappointed by the quality. Pechenik, seeing an opportunity, decided to launch an aquaponic organic farm. It was inspiring, grounding, and—ultimately—unsustainable. Grocery store margins were just too slim. He chalked it up to our inefficient system of bringing food to market, and in 2017 he decided to bring farming back to the American backyard. Pechenik envisioned a sculptural hydroponic tower wired with grow lights that would cycle nutrients and water through the plants' roots—a foolproof micro-farm. His next challenge: getting folks to believe they are capable of not killing their basil plants.*

●● Farming isn't the challenge, it's getting the food to the people. You take this perfect head of organic lettuce, put it into a clamshell, and then put it into a corrugated box to go to a distribution center. And it sits there. The average piece of produce is seven to 10 days old by the time it gets to the grocery store; half has gone bad before it is sold and the rest has lost half its nutritional value. Learning that was my personal wake-up call.

So how do we deliver more nutrition more efficiently? Our idea was to grow seedlings close to where people live and deliver them by mail. Then they'd put the seedlings into our unit, and within weeks, you have a tasty, fully organic product.

The challenge was the hydroponic structure. I wanted it to be vertical, to save space in urban areas, and indoor-outdoor. I hired a firm to make it, and it turned out to be the single ugliest product you've ever seen. This is my first consumer business, and it's harder than B2B in a lot of ways. There are metrics—and then there's magic. The magic you need doesn't necessarily pop up in a spreadsheet. It comes from your gut. And I knew no one was going to buy this unless it was beautiful.

A friend recommended an industrial designer, Pip Tompkin, and hiring him was the smartest choice I've ever made. He designed the Lettuce Grow units, which are lightweight and modular. It took about a year and a half, and we already had 20 employees—that was a tough time.

I had thought funding the company would be easy, because distributing organic, healthy food to Americans is such a big problem; the numbers made sense; and I'd started and exited successful companies. But investors said, 'What's wrong with Whole Foods?' So I ended up self-funding, with some friends and family, and we turned the old farm into our first seedling center.

Almost everything we make is made in the United States—I wanted to support local manufacturing, though it was a huge challenge to find a manufacturer that would use as much recycled plastic as possible. It's just very costly; more expensive than the virgin stuff. But that really helped us later, because the pandemic's major supply chain issues didn't harm us. Even at the height of shipping troubles, our customers could get their farmstand within a week.

When we launched in 2019,



# \$7.1B

Total Revenue 2021

# 14,536

Jobs Added



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and finally had the units available, we had a very low budget for performance marketing. But Zooney and I did some press together. Customers started posting on social media, too. That and word of mouth were really powerful.

All of a sudden, sales really started going up. By February 2020, I think people had started to panic about what was going to happen during the pandemic, and suddenly every day was a record day.

Now we have six seedling

centers across North America and have sold more than four million seedlings. You can grow \$1,500 worth of produce in a year. Convincing people that they won't kill the plants is our challenge, but once someone hears that their

friend's kid picked their own dinner and ate vegetables for the first time, they believe."

—AS TOLD TO CHRISTINE LAGORIO-CHAFKIN



## Top 25 Pacific Companies

### 1. EverHive

San Diego, California  
Human Resources: 18,749%

**"You have to be able to pivot. Don't get stuck on one particular idea. You start seeing more requests from potential clients, or you're seeing something change in the industry and a gap in service—start testing the waters. Our clients pivot too, and we have to flex with our clients."**

—Founder and president  
Brandon Moreno

### 2. Empower Solar

Fresno, California  
Energy: 6,227%

### 3. Revive

Playa Del Rey, California  
Advertising & Marketing:  
5,387%

### 4. PRAY.COM

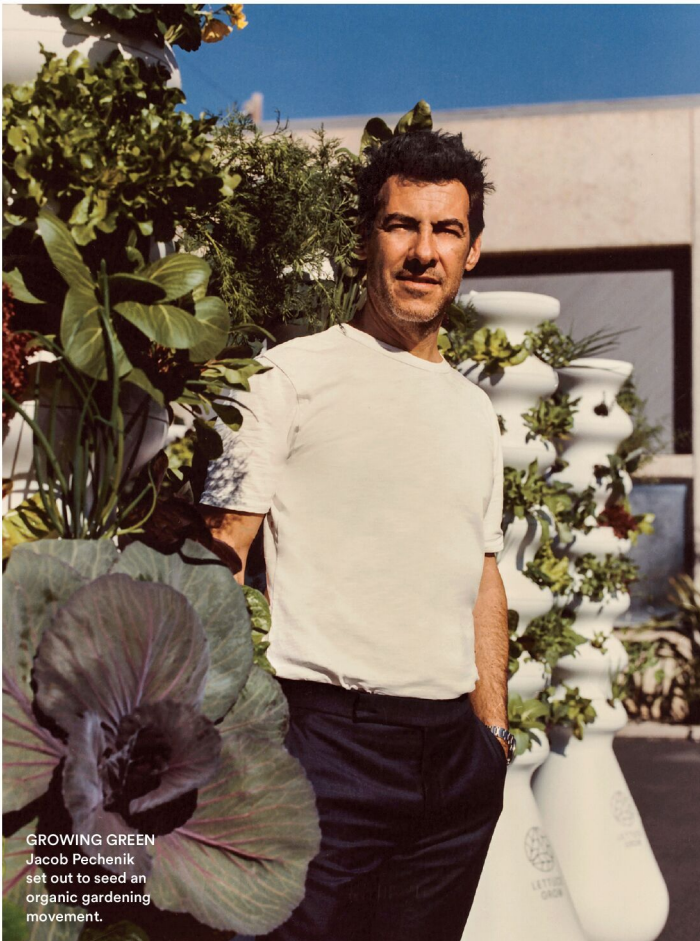
Westlake Village, California  
Media: 4,504%

### 5. ITJ

Rancho Santa Fe, California  
Software: 3,831%

### 6. The Nightfall Group

Beverly Hills, California  
Travel & Hospitality: 3,698%



**GROWING GREEN**  
Jacob Pechenik set out to seed an organic gardening movement.

## 7. Wildfire Systems

Solana Beach, California  
Software: 2,763%

## 8. Puffin Drinkwear

Bend, Oregon  
Consumer Products: 2,501%

**"Massive growth is hard, period. We grew revenue sevenfold from 2019 to 2020, and then almost tripled in 2021. You shouldn't grow that fast. We just didn't know. We were ignorant. You think when you start out that your perspective is shared by everyone, and it's just not."**

—Co-founder & head of product Tyrone Hazen

## 9. Zoomget

Bellevue, Washington  
Consumer Products: 1,845%

## 10. Forme

Los Angeles, California  
Health Products: 1,710%

## 11. Lettuce Grow

Los Angeles, California  
Consumer Products: 1,665%

## 12. SocialBook

Foster City, California  
Software: 1,627%

## 13. Strand

Hermosa Beach, California  
Advertising & Marketing: 1,438%

**"Since the beginning, we've had goals that we created for ourselves. This was our first time doing this, so the type of goals we have have changed, but we still base our decisions on those goals. That's been helpful with our clients, too."**

—Co-founder & managing partner Jocelyn Uhls

## 14. AVM Consulting

Los Angeles, California  
Software: 1,407%

**"First and most important, you need to delegate. That works both ways. When you trust people, they get inspired**

**and they do better work. And then they do better than you can do yourself. If you are the boss and the smartest one in the room, you are doing something wrong."**

—Founder & CEO Alexey Moseyev

## 15. Electric

Los Angeles, California  
Advertising & Marketing: 1,233%

## 16. Compose.ly

Seattle, Washington  
Advertising & Marketing: 1,206%

## 17. Tax Relief Advocates

Irvine, California  
Financial Services: 1,157%

## 18. Greenberg Design Gallery

Palo Alto, California  
Consumer Products: 1,116%

## 19. Jane Technologies

Santa Cruz, California  
Software: 1,092%

## 20. Coinme

Seattle, Washington  
Financial Services: 995%

## 21. Moose Labs

Lawndale, California  
Consumer Products: 951%

## 22. Cymbiotika

San Diego, California  
Consumer Products: 948%

## 23. Paint the Town

San Diego, California  
Consumer Services: 926%

## 24. Jobot

Newport Beach, California  
Human Resources: 919%

## 25. Aloware

Encino, California  
Software: 813%



# SOUTH- WEST

BY  
THE  
NUMBERS

# 166

Companies

## How I Built a Recruit- ing Company Around Values

### TalentWoo, No. 7

### Gilbert, Arizona

### Jerel Cain, founder and president

### Two-year revenue growth: 2,937%

*Jerel Cain, 53, spent the aughts bouncing around Silicon Valley, building out recruiting teams and recruiting processes at various start-ups looking to hire. When he moved to the Phoenix area, he realized he could do the same for a fast-growing industry there: real estate. In 2011, he founded TalentWoo, a recruitment process outsourcing company that helps real estate organizations find, attract, and hire talent quickly to scale their operations. TalentWoo operated as a one-man show until an influx of business during the pandemic led Cain to hire more than 30 people.*

*As it would turn out, hiring was the easy part for him. Hiring the right people, ironically, proved to be more difficult.*

●● I had built a career in California as an independent consultant, growing high-tech Silicon Valley startups. Many of them went public or got acquired, making the founders rich and leaving me with great contacts and success stories, but no financial wealth. So I moved to Gilbert, Arizona—a place I'd never been to or heard of, but found listed in what many reports called the fastest-growing county in America at the time—to buy an affordable home for my family and invest in real estate. I took a job recruiting for a homebuilder in 2004, and things went well until the housing crisis in 2008, when I was laid off.

Because of the cyclical nature of the economy, I



Includes AZ, NM, OK,  
and TX

Big-name companies have been making waves by ditching their California headquarters for new bases in the Southwest. With a light regulatory touch and no income tax in Texas, the region is an emerging tech hub; Tesla, Oracle, and Hewlett-Packard have all relocated to the Lone Star State. Startups—from molecular labs to residential solar energy providers—are joining them.



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FULL RANKINGS,  
GO TO [INC.COM/  
SOUTHWEST](https://INC.COM/SOUTHWEST).

**188%**

Median Growth

**\$10.6B**

Total Revenue 2021

**16,116**

Jobs Added



**APPRAISING  
ARIZONA**  
Jerel Cain applied  
his startup  
recruiting chops to  
a hot real estate  
market.

couldn't reliably depend on any company for a paycheck. I had two young children at the time, and I would do whatever I needed to do to provide for my family, so I decided to take matters into my own hands and offer my recruiting skills to real estate firms.

To test the idea, I planned to meet with potential clients and present my recruiting methods to 30 companies in 30 days. By the fifth presentation, I had my first gig—finding eight recruiters for American Homes 4 Rent, a real estate investment trust—and an invoice for \$119,000. For years, AMH was my only client and TalentWoo was doing about a million a year in revenue. Besides a few contractors, it was just me.

The pandemic housing boom brought an influx of business overnight. In 2021, we landed Zillow as a client and I could

no longer handle the workload with just contractors. The half-dozen contractors who were working part time for me I hired immediately, and then I brought on another 20 or so team members. I needed managers, and I assumed those same people who had assisted me for years could easily take those roles. I was wrong. They were independent contractors for a reason; many of them didn't quite understand how to work as part of a team.

Instead of collaborating, people were vying for various positions within the company and playing political games. Instead of being encouraging, new managers were putting others down.

I signed up for this program called Elite Entrepreneurs here in Arizona, a program that provides the leadership coaching and management workshops

needed to grow a company from \$1 to \$10 million. That's where I first learned about company values, and how to assess people for those values. I ended up cutting a third of my staff. It was excruciating to let go people I'd worked with, some for nearly a decade. We did more than \$5 million in revenue, and I've now learned that finding people is easy. Helping them work together is much more difficult."

—AS TOLD TO BRIT MORSE



## Top 25 Southwest Companies

1. Blue Hammer Roofing

Dallas, Texas  
Construction: **13,946%**

2. **Simple Solar**  
Houston, Texas  
Energy: **8,007%**

3. **Qwick** Scottsdale, Arizona  
Travel & Hospitality: **5,172%**

4. **Epic Golf Club**  
Scottsdale, Arizona  
Travel & Hospitality: **3,053%**

5. **Paradigm Laboratories**  
Tucson, Arizona  
Health Services: **3,003%**

6. **Medical Edge Recruitment**  
The Woodlands, Texas  
Health Services: **2,980%**

7. **TalentWoo** Gilbert, Arizona  
Real Estate: **2,937%**

8. **Specialty1 Partners**  
Houston, Texas  
Health Services: **2,913%**

9. **Build 512** Austin, Texas



# NORTH



Includes CT, MA, ME, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, and VT

BY  
THE  
NUMBERS

**169**  
Companies

**208%**  
Median Growth

## How I Spun a Horrible Summer Job Experience Into a Lucrative Niche Outsourcing Business

**Horatio, No. 8**

**New York City**

**Jose Herrera, co-founder and CEO**

**Two-year revenue growth: 1,960%**

*Jose Herrera, 34, had always wanted to be an entrepreneur,*

*but was afraid of giving up his perfectly sweet career in investment banking. When he entered Columbia Business School in 2017, he was, in fact, going for his MBA to boost his standing back at Morgan Stanley. Instead, he wound up wrangling classmates Alex Ross, 33, and Jared Karson, 31, into becoming seed investors with*

Construction: 2,449%

10. **Backd Business Funding**

Austin, Texas  
Financial Services: 2,329%

11. **CertifiD** Austin, Texas

Software: 2,106%

12. **CloudServus** Austin, Texas

IT Services: 1,923%

**"Fast growth can highlight the importance of having strong systems and processes in place, as the increased demand and activity can quickly expose inefficiencies and limitations of existing systems, leading to operational problems and decreased customer satisfaction."**

—Founder & president Dave Rowe

13. **HighLevel** Dallas, Texas

Software: 1,909%

**"When we're in the trenches with our customers, we learn**

**how to improve our product and processes and build a stronger relationship with our customer. We've taken this as a core value of our company, and it has provided us great success."**

—Co-founder Robin Alex

14. **Jess Lea** Magnolia, Texas

Retail: 1,471%

15. **Archer Review**

Dallas, Texas  
Education: 1,443%

16. **TimelyMD**

Fort Worth, Texas  
Health Services: 1,402%

**"I've actually found a mental health provider, a counselor I can work with who is focused on founder CEOs and my continuing to invest in myself, just the same way that we're focused on the business. Providing resources to students is important. And I talk about**

**it with my team and I encourage them to make sure that they're also focused on their mental health."**

—Co-founder, CEO, & chairman Luke Hejl

17. **Southwest Homes**

Chino Valley, Arizona  
Construction: 1,264%

18. **Goal Digger Girl Co.**

Dripping Springs, Texas  
Business Products & Services: 953%

19. **HomeLight**

Scottsdale, Arizona  
Real Estate: 901%

**"Regardless of how fast you are growing, the best-laid plans can be changed on a moment's notice—so be prepared to move quickly."**

—COO Sumant Sridharan

## SOUTHWEST

20. **T & T Industrial**

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma  
Manufacturing: 866%

21. **Fort Capital**

Fort Worth, Texas  
Real Estate: 814%

22. **Madluvv** Gilbert, Arizona

Consumer Products: 790%

23. **Dynamic SLR**

Richardson, Texas  
Energy: 707%

24. **SmartMoving Software**

Dallas, Texas  
Software: 693%

25. **Valiant Capital**

Austin, Texas  
Financial Services: 677%

## EAST

The Northeast is home to some of the most iconic business hubs in the country—with Wall Street and plenty of tech transplants in New York City and Boston, the reigning leader in biotech. But the region is not populated just by corporate giants. From 2019 to 2021, the Northeast fueled more than two million new business starts.

# \$7B

Total Revenue 2021

# 12,066

Jobs Added



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*him in a direct-to-consumer, ecofriendly cleaning company called Cleancult. In doing so, the three friends learned of one of the startup's pain points. Cleancult's founders wanted to build a robust customer support system, but were struggling to find talent. Herrera sensed a new opportunity. His inspiration to provide call center*

*outsourcing specifically for startups came from an unlikely experience—a miserable high school job that appeared nowhere on his résumé.*

●● I grew up in the Dominican Republic and worked in a call center in high school. The offices felt like a prison: You're trapped in a cubicle; displays

are dark; there's no collaboration. Everyone's calling in to complain. It's horrible. Customer service is a very tough job, and the environment was not conducive for employees to do an amazing job.

With Horatio, I wanted to do the complete opposite of a sweatshop environment. I wanted to build an office in the

D.R. that provides everything employees would get at a fast-growing startup in the U.S.—bright, open, co-working roundtables where you can actually ask your teammates questions. We wanted to make our employees feel taken care of and rewarded for their contributions—like they're a true extension of these companies.

**GOOD CALL**  
Jose Herrera  
turned a startup's  
pain point into a  
niche business.



Because when they feel happy at work, they can perform better for our clients.

We started the company out of my studio on Horatio Street in the West Village in September 2018. No one from business school or our networks was excited about what we were doing; it was hard to raise capital. Now that's a blessing, because we never raised capital and we're profitable.

It wasn't hard to find employees at the beginning. We leveraged my network in the D.R. Once we got to 30 people, we needed to sell the culture and vision that we're not just another call center. That involved marketing and a social media presence to attract young talent.

We had 10 clients when Covid hit, and five went out of business overnight. We had 40 employees and took the risk of retaining everyone instead of doing layoffs. Our five remaining clients were e-commerce. And within a month they grew exponentially because everyone started shopping online, so we reallocated employees to those clients. Our competitors were laying off people, and we were able to capture a lot of that talent. From there, the business took off. Now, we have about 100 clients.

Startups had been focused on growth and were spending money unnecessarily on customer service in-house. Now, with the current economic conditions, everyone across every industry is ultra-focused on profitability and finding ways to be more efficient. We're seeing a lot of demand from tech companies that want to cut costs across the board and outsource their customer service operations to this \$262 billion market.

Today, we're up to 1,200 employees, and one of our growing pains is just space.

In December 2022, we moved into a new office that fits about 1,500 employees. We built a full onsite daycare, a gym, a yoga room, and an outdoor terrace. We have a cafeteria and provide daily catered breakfast, lunch, and dinner. What I keep hearing from new employees is, "What's the catch?" There's no catch. It's meant to be a community, and I'm hopeful that it will continue to attract very good talent. This is why we're better than our competitors."

—AS TOLD TO ALI DONALDSON



## Top 25 Northeast Companies

**1. Rarebreed Veterinary Partners** Portland, Maine  
Health Services: **4,691%**

**2. Dante Labs**  
New York, New York  
Health Services: **3,873%**

**3. Athena Club**  
New York, New York  
Consumer Products: **3,573%**

**4. Orchard**  
New York, New York  
Real Estate: **2,916%**

**5. Off the Muck Market**  
Canastota, New York  
Food & Beverage: **2,211%**

**6. Snappy**  
New York, New York  
Software: **2,201%**

**"We just had a whole new executive team join Snappy. I hired a CRO who was VP of global sales at Glassdoor, a CFO who was VP of finance at Fastly, and a chief product officer who was at Carta. It's good to understand how other**

**companies work through different challenges. They were able to bring that perspective, and when we had uncertainty, when we weren't sure exactly what next steps to take, they were able to say, 'We did this before.'**

—Co-founder & CEO Hani Goldstein

**7. Numerated**  
Boston, Massachusetts  
Financial Services: **2,087%**

**8. Horatio**  
New York, New York  
Business Products & Services: **1,960%**

**9. Over the Top Marketing**  
Milford, Connecticut  
Advertising & Marketing: **1,662%**

**10. Hometap**  
Boston, Massachusetts  
Real Estate: **1,530%**

**11. Rimsys**  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
Software: **1,520%**

**12. Tuck Consulting Group**  
Underhill, Vermont  
Business Products & Services: **1,485%**

**13. ClearDoc**  
New York, New York  
Software: **1,411%**

**14. Athletic Brewing Co**  
Stratford, Connecticut  
Consumer Products: **1,359%**

**"It honestly helped that I came in as a total outsider to the industry. As a company, we've generally tried to hire people who are half inside and half outside the industry, because you do come in and ask those potentially stupid first-principles questions. An example of that for me was: Why isn't there non-alcoholic beer on e-commerce? We launched what was essentially the first non-alcoholic beer on**

**e-commerce, and everyone told me I was stupid for doing it. But in some years, e-commerce is more than 50 percent of our business. It's been an enormous growth driver and huge differentiator for us."**

—Co-founder & CEO Bill Shufelt

**15. Percent**  
New York, New York  
Financial Services: **1,329%**

**16. Fluency**  
Burlington, Vermont  
Advertising & Marketing: **1,269%**

**17. rockITdata**  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
IT Services: **1,214%**

**18. Groom Construction**  
Salem, Massachusetts  
Construction: **1,200%**

**19. Tektree Systems**  
Oceanside, New York  
IT Services: **1,129%**

**20. Intensify**  
Franklin, Massachusetts  
Software: **1,104%**

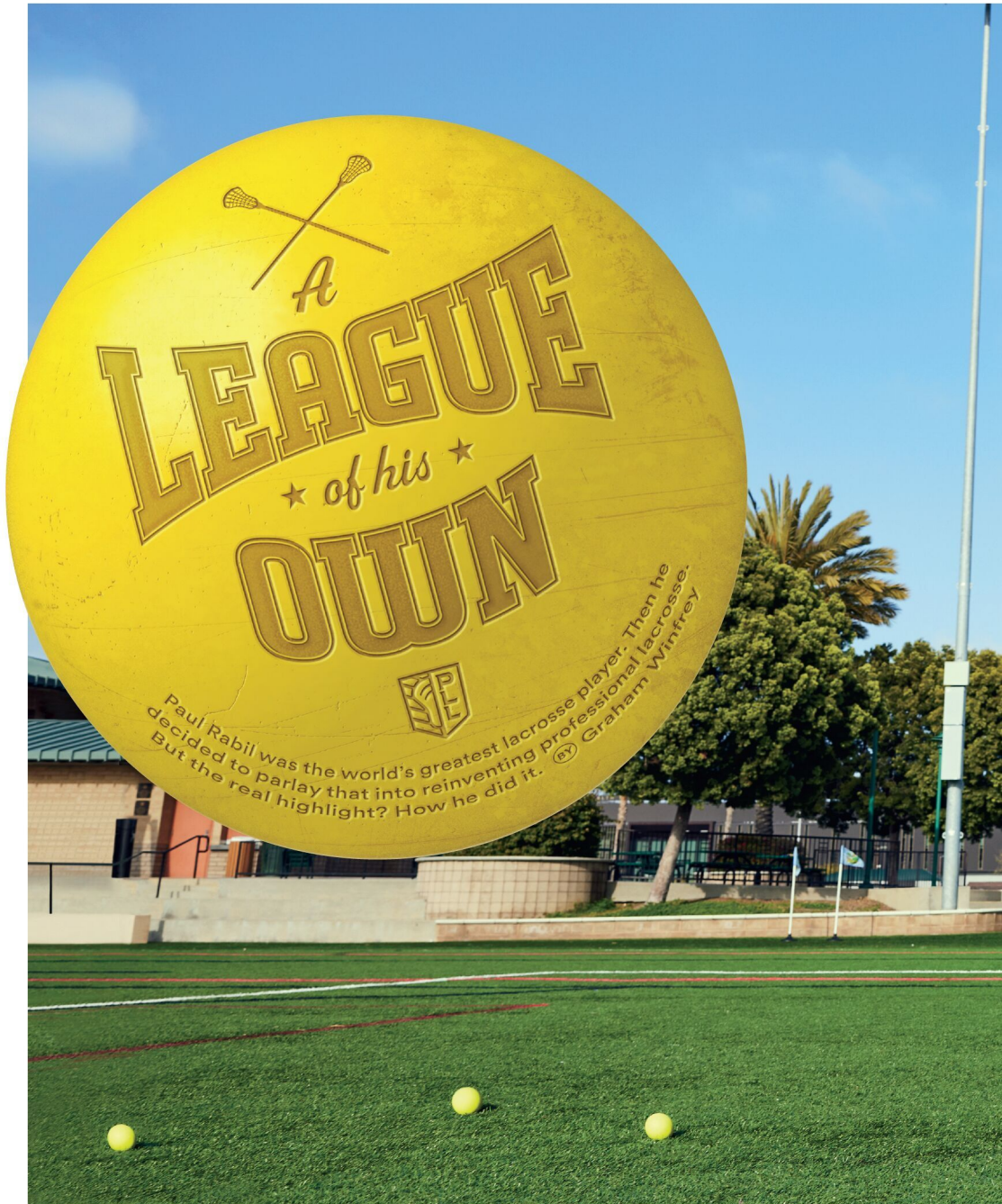
**21. Digital Blue**  
Saratoga Springs, New York  
Business Products & Services: **1,097%**

**22. Cygnus Education**  
Conshohocken, Pennsylvania  
Advertising & Marketing: **913%**

**23. Piece of Cake Moving and Storage** New York, New York  
Logistics & Transportation: **844%**

**24. Mama's Junk Co.**  
Vineland, New Jersey  
Retail: **840%**

**25. Biz2Credit**  
New York, New York  
Financial Services: **806%**







UPSIDE  
POTENTIAL  
Paul Rabil bets  
his barnstorming  
PLL can turn pro  
lacrosse into a  
top-tier sport.

# Paul Rabil was sick of Major League Lacrosse. It was 2017,

and Rabil, a two-time MVP, was embarrassed to tell people he was a professional lacrosse player. He had good reason. In the world of pro sports, lacrosse had a pitiful reputation, if it had a reputation at all. Founded in 1999 as the first professional outdoor lacrosse league, MLL never attracted a meaningful fan base. Attendance had plummeted by 40 percent since 2011, to an average of just 3,800 per game. By comparison, the NCAA men's lacrosse championship game once drew nearly 50,000 fans.

MLL also offered one of the worst player experiences in all of professional sports. Players worked full-time jobs outside of lacrosse and played games on weekends during the summer. The base salary for rookies was \$6,000. When the league made travel arrangements, it would sometimes book players on connecting flights to save money. What's more, players didn't always have access to basic amenities like locker rooms and showers—or ice baths. Rabil had to buy ice at the CVS across the street from his apartment to treat his knee and foot.

After more than a decade in MLL, Rabil knew that professional lacrosse was broken. So he set out to fix it. In 2017, in partnership with his brother Mike, a serial entrepreneur who ran a small investment firm, Paul raised a pool of capital from a group of private equity firms and hedge funds and made an offer to acquire MLL for \$35 million. The bid failed. Then the Rabils decided to do something crazy: They would start their own league.

In so doing, they would become the closest thing in the sporting world to entrepreneurs. In sports, the teams aren't

the startups now; the leagues are. A GM might have a founder's spirit (e.g., Billy Beane of the *Moneyball* Oakland A's), but, generally speaking, a sports team today is no more an entrepreneurial venture than a fast-food franchise is.

In making himself the pearl in this oyster, Rabil's position would be unique in sports. Rabil is often described as the LeBron James of lacrosse. But he was vying to become more than that. It was as if LeBron had left the NBA, formed his own league, and then tried to put the NBA out of business and swallow up all its players.

**To find the germ** of the strategy Rabil would use to position his league, you have to go back to 2008, the year the 6'3", 225-pound, four-time All-American graduated from lacrosse powerhouse Johns Hopkins University. That year, Facebook let users convert so-called friend accounts, which were capped at 5,000 followers, to fan accounts, which had no cap. Literally overnight, Rabil went from 5,000 Facebook friends to 50,000 Facebook fans. It's likely most were young lacrosse players who'd seen him on ESPN in two NCAA Final Fours. "That's when I knew there was an audience for people in lacrosse that no one really knew about," he says. The business lesson wasn't lost on him: A pro league already existed, but it hadn't caught on. There was a market waiting to be tapped.

The number-one pick in the 2008 MLL draft, Rabil initially took a day job in real estate. But he also had a flair for social media. In 2009, he started a YouTube channel and began posting weekly videos of lacrosse tutorials, workout routines,

sports nutrition tips, and snippets of a day in the life of a professional lacrosse player. When he wasn't vlogging or actually playing the game, Rabil worked with his brother, first helping run a number of fitness franchises, and then as an investment partner.

As his YouTube following grew, Rabil attracted the interest of companies that wanted to sponsor the biggest name in lacrosse. By 2013, he became the first player in the sport to earn more than \$1 million in total endorsements, thanks to deals with brands including Under Armour, New Balance, and Red Bull. But Rabil, who is 37 now, wasn't just building a larger personal brand than any other lacrosse player. His social media presence was rivaling that of MLL itself.

Rabil's online following didn't go unnoticed by his teammates, especially when the league was struggling to attract viewers. "I remember a player saying to me that he wished the MLL had just streamed all the games on Paul's YouTube channel," says Terry Foy, CEO of *Inside Lacrosse* magazine. "That was really eye-opening. The players understood the value of the platform that he had built."

The problem was, MLL didn't. So in October 2018, the Rabils announced the formation of the Premier Lacrosse League. Mike Rabil would be CEO; Paul would be chief strategy officer—and a player in the league. A seven-figure deal with NBC would bring games to TV. They would start playing the following June.

**For an upstart** league like the PLL, going up against an incumbent with a 19-year head start would not be easy. The Rabils had to recruit players from the same talent pool as their direct competitor, and they were heavily outgunned. While MLL and its teams had a front office of more than 50 execs, the PLL had a recruiting team of four—Rabil and fellow players Rob Pannell, Tom Schreiber, and Kyle Harrison.

The PLL did have some deep pockets; early investors included CAA Sports and private equity firms Blum Capital and the Chernin Group. (Later backers would include Brooklyn Nets owner and Alibaba co-founder Joe Tsai, and Patriots owner Robert Kraft.) They were drawn by a burgeoning, covetable audience: A 2018 NCAA study identified lacrosse as the fastest-growing college sport in the U.S. over the



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COURTESY OF PLL (IMAGES 1, 2, & 3); GETTY IMAGES (IMAGE 4)

previous 15 years. The fans also skewed young—“digital natives,” as Rabil called them, perfect for the league’s purposes.

The investors helped the PLL offer wages on average four times higher than MLL’s. But players were hesitant to jump leagues out of fear of being sued for breach of contract. The PLL had even set aside a portion of its seed capital to pay legal fees from expected litigation.

As the league made enemies with MLL loyalists, bidding wars broke out for individual players. Meanwhile, rumors spread that the Rabils hadn’t secured the funding they needed. “We were under attack by folks who just didn’t think we could do it,” Paul says. “It was hell for a while.”

At the same time, MLL and the PLL were battling for sponsorship dollars from the same companies. “We’d sit down with the heads of marketing at PepsiCo and kind of sniff around like, *Was the MLL here before us? What did they say?*” Rabil recalls.

Ultimately, the PLL enticed more than 140 MLL players to switch leagues. On top of an average salary of \$35,000, players would receive full health coverage, including a mental health component providing access to sports psychologists. The PLL would also become the first North American professional sports league to offer equity to its players. Everyone’s incentives would thus be aligned—the league, as it grew, and the players, as they built their personal brands.

MLL didn’t back down. Shortly after the end of the 2019 season, it offered to acquire the PLL for \$35 million, the same amount it had rejected from the Rabils two years earlier. The deal would have netted the brothers around \$6 million each. They declined.

1. Rabil salutes the crowd after a 2019 game with the Atlas Lacrosse Club.

2. The Rabils discuss the PLL’s launch with Cheddar’s Kristen Scholer in 2018.

3. About 128,000 fans tuned in to the PLL’s inaugural all-star game in Los Angeles in 2019, then a PLL viewership record.

4. Paul Rabil talks up the league on NBC’s *Late Night With Seth Meyers* in 2021.

**Sports are often** thought of as a competition between teams and athletes, but the history of professional team sports is as much about the competition between leagues. All of the major pro sports started that way. Unallied teams coalesced into rival leagues that fought one another until, typically, all but one died. The Rabils held the same ambition: to be the rare revolutionaries who, from time to time, come along and change the game.

And to do that, the Rabils decided they would throw out the MLL playbook almost entirely. For starters, they would structure the league as a single entity rather than as a

group of franchises. And rather than having teams based in home cities, the brothers would adopt a touring model. Each weekend, a different city would host all teams (six to begin, eight now), with two games on Saturday and two on Sunday. Fans could buy weekend passes to attend all four games. As in golf, tennis, and NASCAR, the touring model would create significant operational efficiencies, including not having to host games at multiple venues every week. Players could live anywhere they wanted, not unlike the distributed workforce of a tech startup.

The league was mindful of its demographics—and how audiences interacted with it. Whereas MLL had failed to adapt to the ways fans were engaging with sports on social media, the PLL would be a digital-first media company from day one.

On the field, the Rabils would introduce a number of changes to make lacrosse a more entertaining sport, including the addition of fieldside seats. Like courtside seats in the NBA, the single row of chairs just feet from the action would offer in-person fans an in-your-face spectating experience for a premium price.


Home viewers would get a bump-up too. Known as the fastest game on two feet, lacrosse can speed by at a dizzying blur, with a baseball-size orb whizzing around at more than 100 mph. Capturing the action on the field for TV viewers would require more—and closer—camera angles than football or soccer, so the PLL opted for 10 cameras, compared with MLL's four.

"If you're just doing a three- to five-camera broadcast, you're not capturing the intricacies on the ground level," Rabil says. To turn up the action even more, the league shortened the field by 10 yards and forced teams to contend with a 52-second shot clock, compared with 60 seconds in MLL and the NCAA.

Rabil's insights from his own online presence would inspire one of the PLL's most significant innovations: how it promotes its players. Five decades ago, the NBA realized that what differentiated it from, say, the NFL was that its players don't wear helmets—their faces were a marketing opportunity. Likewise, the PLL would find its own media strategy to turn lacrosse superstars into celebrities. TV announcers would interview players through helmet mics during stoppages in play, and every broadcast would feature

raw audio from players recorded during games. "The core thesis was people care more about the stars, and they're following the players," says PLL chief operating officer Andrew Sinenberg. "So, if that's the case, people need to know who those individuals are."

The PLL didn't cheap out on player promotion either. Unlike in MLL, where some athletes paid for their own photographers to take pictures at games, the PLL would provide players with game photos and videos to share on their social media accounts, helping them build their own personal brands. The production value of the content, from slickly produced



**We were under attack by folks who just didn't think we could do it. It was hell for a while."**

—Paul Rabil

highlight videos to dazzling action shots, would come to rival that of any sports league in the world.

"When you look at what guys have been able to post on behalf of themselves and the PLL, it's just unbelievable," says former MLL and PLL goalie Drew Adams, who retired in 2022 with the most saves in the history of pro lacrosse. "It's clear, crisp photos and videos, and that's the stuff that starts to gain some virality."

On top of their regular salary, PLL players could earn additional compensation for marketing and advertising activities ranging from posting content on social media to working with partner brands to helping with ticket sales. The result would be an explosion of pro lacrosse content on

social platforms, adding up to 739 million social media impressions and 312 million video views in 2022.

"The investments that Paul and Mike have made on content creators and social media personnel have brought this league to places the sport hadn't been," says CAA Sports co-head Michael Levine. Dozens of others had pitched Levine about revamping pro lacrosse, but he passed on every one until he invested in the PLL's 2018 seed round. (The league has not disclosed the size of its funding rounds.)

At the same time, MLL was imploding. Besides the decline in attendance, the PLL was luring away its best talent, and an ill-fated attempt by MLL to expand was a flop, with seven teams folding. In December 2020, just 18 months after the PLL's first game, the PLL acquired MLL. The price: \$1 million. The Rabils had won. No longer facing a rival league, the PLL would now have to prove that lacrosse could not just survive at the pro level, but also thrive.

**It's a rainy** Fourth of July weekend in 2021, and Rabil has just finished playing in a PLL game at Hofstra University, on New York's Long Island. A bit dejected—his team lost—he perks right up when I ask about his vision for the PLL. Speaking with the polished confidence of a startup founder backed by big-league investors, Rabil points to the Ultimate Fighting Championship, the martial arts sports brand that was sold for \$2 million in 2001 and for \$4 billion in 2016. "It took the UFC 27 years to get where it is now," he says, still sore from the game, in which, by the way, he happened to break pro lacrosse's all-time scoring record. "I think we can do what the UFC did in half the time."

TV and streaming money will be an essential part of the chase. Less than a year after that interview, in March 2022, the PLL signed a four-year, eight-figure media rights deal with ESPN, roughly 10 times the value of its initial NBC Sports deal. All 47 games would be streamed on ESPN+, with some games also broadcast on ESPN, ESPN2, and ABC. It was the most significant media rights deal in the history of lacrosse. (The PLL doesn't disclose revenue, but did say it grew 74 percent last year; and a source with knowledge of the league's finances says revenue for 2022 was more than \$20 million.)

Still, the PLL has a way to go before

it can rival the UFC's draw. The most-watched game in outdoor pro lacrosse history, in June 2022, attracted 452,000 streaming viewers, compared with the UFC's record 2.4 million pay-per-view customers. Average PLL viewership did jump 26 percent in 2022, to 157,000, and the Los Angeles-based league sold out four venues during its 2022 season. But the PLL's largest weekend draw of the year, at Johns Hopkins's Homewood Field, was only 13,000.

Like many co-founders who are related, the Rabils have found that running the PLL together comes with unique challenges. Both are former competitive athletes—Mike, 39, captained the Dartmouth football team—and they can get heated over league strategy. “Mike’s thinking about the health and wellness of our P&L, and I’m thinking about how quickly we can get a sports fan who hasn’t watched lacrosse to the screen,” Paul Rabil says.

So, for the past several years, they’ve relied on therapy to help them navigate their professional and personal relationship. “What we’ve learned from therapy is to understand what’s important to each other, which is often underneath what we’re debating,” Paul says. “Sometimes it takes a couple rounds of verbal bouts.” The brothers’ experience in therapy is part of the reason the PLL provides employees with a monthly stipend for mental health.

Mike has sought to reduce the stigma attached to mental health issues by sharing some of his personal struggles on Twitter. On World Mental Health Day in October 2021, he tweeted that “49% of entrepreneurs deal with mental health issues directly” and that he has “suffered from a few panic attacks and sought professional help for my anxiety. As an entrepreneur, I felt the pressure of building a company but also trying to maintain the persona of calm and relentless work ethic. I’ve found the right mix of yoga, breathing, medication, swimming/hiking, and a yellow lab :)”

**Two months after** his record-breaking game at Hofstra, in a speech at Washington, D.C.’s Audi Field, Rabil announced his retirement as a pro lacrosse player and his transition to full-time entrepreneur. Despite the bittersweet nature of the announcement, his tone was optimistic as he assured a crowd of PLL employees (there are 80 now), investors, and advisers



**HOLLYWOOD TREATMENT:** Rabil is putting the spotlight on the players—including himself. He’s the subject of an ESPN documentary, *Fate of a Sport*.

that the league would become “the next major sports league in North America.”

Rabil admits that the PLL still isn’t profitable—one source familiar with the league’s financials says it is losing millions per year (the PLL would not comment)—but he attributes that partly to reinvesting earnings back into growth. According to CAA Sports’ Levine, the investor group is “completely comfortable with how things are progressing.”

Looking back on the hell of the league’s early days, Rabil arrives at an essential truth about entrepreneurship: It never really gets easier. “By nature, we feel like our feet are to the fire every single day,” he says, “driving revenue, driving attention, and driving general conversion across all of our business units.”

I ask him what he thinks the hardest thing to grow will be this year. Rabil ponders for a long beat before answering: “Everything.” To succeed in the long term, the PLL needs to turn lacrosse players into stars. In the short term, to meet Rabil’s timeline, it has to grow at a rate that few leagues ever have in the history of professional sports. If it doesn’t, the fans, players, and investors might stop believing in lacrosse at the pro level. “That’s staring us in the face every day,” Rabil says, in a lament familiar to any entrepreneur. Heading into year five of his league-building venture, Rabil takes solace in another essential truth: “We wouldn’t have had this opportunity if it were easy.”

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GRAHAM WINFREY is Inc.’s features editor.



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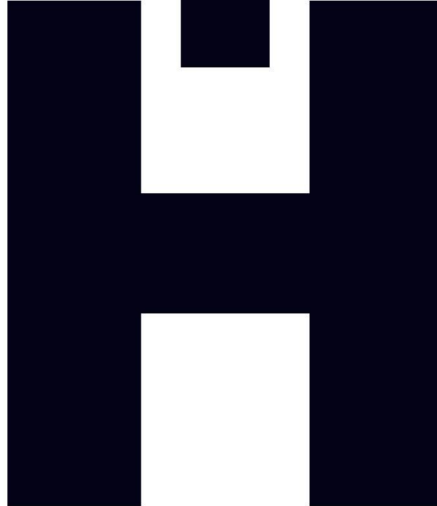
by  
Devin  
Gordon

Illustrations  
by  
Emiliano  
Ponzi

The mind-  
blowing  
journey of  
psychedelic  
therapy,  
from  
underground  
taboo to  
founder's  
little helper  
to mental  
health  
unicorn.

**T**he local time here in the cloud forest of Costa Rica is 11 a.m., and today is November 11, which means that in a little over 11 minutes, the full time and date will be 11:11:11 on 11/11—a cosmic alignment so conspicuous I can't help but feel like I've arrived in exactly the right place at exactly the right time. A resonant note of reassurance helps when you're contemplating a plateful of magic mushrooms in a circle of 10 mostly strangers and about to go on your first psychedelic journey, already far from home.

As for the place itself, I'm at Holos retreat center, part wellness destination, part incubator for plant medicine startups, a sensorial staging ground for a



growing list of entrepreneurs who are building retreat programs around specific themes (leadership, in our case) for specific clientele, with the help of specific psychoactive medicines. The center is perched atop a high ridgeline that peers over the Diamante Valley. When you unzip your tent flaps in the morning, you see the 200-foot Nauyaca Waterfall, the tallest in Costa Rica, a mile away across the valley, a slow-motion strip of alabaster painted onto the cliffside. Breathtaking. Another type of reassurance, though not strictly necessary for the therapeutic process we're about to undergo.

In fact, the only reason I've come all this way is that I'd

been disinvented from a psychedelic therapy retreat in upstate New York, hosted by a founder, because at least one of the guests—entrepreneurs, politicians, athletes, corporate executives, and the like—had vetoed my presence. The vote had to be unanimous for me to attend, and it's easy to understand why.

Aside from the obvious risk to your professional reputation, there's also the strong likelihood of snot-crying around people you've just met. We were about to dive into the deepest recesses of our minds and bodies with the aid of a powerful plant medicine, psilocybin, a hallucinogenic chemical found in scores of mushrooms that has been used in healing traditions dating back thousands of years, across multiple cultures and continents. I'd read enough Aldous Huxley and Michael Pollan to know that we would all be rendered about as vulnerable—as *open*—as a human can be. And let's not skip this technical detail: It remains a serious crime in the U.S. to possess psilocybin. Many people with the means and drive for transformative self-reflection are taking the risk anyway, though they may not wish to do so around someone who would be taking notes.

The taboo, however, is starting to relax. Psychedelic therapy is creeping toward legitimacy—scientifically, socially, and legally—after having gone underground 50-plus years ago, when psilocybin, LSD, and peyote got added to Schedule I, the DEA's list of substances deemed to have “no currently accepted medical use ... and a high potential for abuse.” In January, the supervised use of psilocybin became legal in Oregon, and researchers expect that MDMA (a.k.a. ecstasy) will soon be shifted into the medical treatment column. Clinics that administer ketamine to treat depression have cropped up in New York, Chicago, Houston, and other cities. Mindbloom, an early leader in the space, adopted a telehealth model in which patients guided by a clinician over a video call take ketamine, in pill form, at home. But they have bigger plans. “I named the company Mindbloom, and not Ketabloom, for a reason,” says founder and CEO Dylan Beynon. “I thought that ketamine would be a wedge into the market to help us build out our protocols, tools, a provider network—build a brand—so that we would be prepared to add these other medicines.”

Psychedelic trips have been a form of

social currency among entrepreneurs at least since Steve Jobs declared that LSD changed his life. Now a number of indicators suggest that the role of psychedelics in business, on the supply side and the demand side, is primed to take off. What that means for founders, in particular, is a wide-open question. “How psychedelics can help facilitate leadership is still a novel thing to look at,” says Paul F. Austin, founder of Third Wave, a psychedelics literacy platform. “It's a huge thing, still largely untapped.” His guided retreat company, Synthesis, has facilitated experiences for more than 1,000 people at sites in the Netherlands, where it's legal. “I've always been interested in this mystical experience and showing up in a business environment more compassionate, more empathetic, with better vision,” he says. Psychedelics can facilitate that shift, and getting people in leadership positions to embrace them, he believes, represents the greatest potential for “lasting systemic change.”

The word *psychedelic* combines just two Greek words, “mind” and “manifesting.” And that's what we're here to do on this ridge in Costa Rica: manifest something in our minds. Create new neural pathways, off-ramps from the mental ruts that keep us stuck in the same old mud, making the same mistakes, being the same people who got us stuck in the first place. Scientists call this neuroplasticity, and say its effects offer the opportunity to reset our thinking.

It takes more than a few minutes to eat a plate of psychedelic mushrooms, and about an hour for the psilocybin to migrate to the target serotonin receptors in the prefrontal cortex, which is why people tend to start wondering when—then if—their journey will begin. I counted eight shriveled stems on my dish, chalky white and tough to chew but not as *blech* as I had feared, thanks to the accompanying mound of blueberries. The clock had ticked past 11:11:11, and the 10 of us sat in sweats and jammies on mats arranged like rays off the sun, as the clouds drew a curtain around us. The medicine came on gradually at first, and then all at once, like a question mark stretching out of its stoop into an exclamation point.

**M**ushrooms, fungi, the stuff we've traveled all this way to experience, function in the world as filters, purifiers, recyclers—nature's

ferrying service between life and death and back to life again. And if you read through the experiences of the mounting number of research subjects who've taken them in clinical settings, you'll notice parallels between what they do in the natural world and what they do inside our brains.

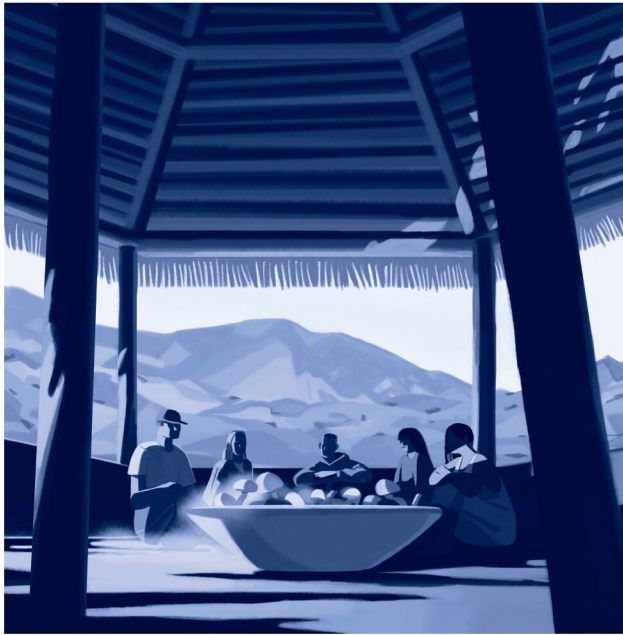
Different plant medicines have different effects on different parts of the brain, and thus take you on journeys that are different, yet similar in nature. Hallucinogens, such as psilocybin and LSD, or lysergic acid diethylamide, work by binding to the serotonin 2A receptor, one of 15 in a system used to coordinate brain activity. Serotonin is the neurotransmitter targeted by an entire class of antidepressants known as SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors), which make more of the stuff available for connections between neurons. The promise of psychedelics is that they do the work more efficiently, better, faster.

In discussions around this type of therapy, certain medicines often get lumped in with psychedelics even though they're not. MDMA is an entactogen, a category of compounds that impact social perceptions and amplify empathy, which is one of the reasons they make people want to hug a tree, but also why researchers believe they help PTSD patients unpack traumatic memories without triggering the fight-or-flight response that proves so problematic in the nonthreatening context of everyday life. Ketamine is an anesthetic with a dissociative effect that puts users in a dreamlike state and dissolves one's sense of self. It's the only one of these drugs as yet approved by the FDA.

Ayahuasca, meanwhile, is a beverage—you're drinking the psychedelic component DMT, which activates the frontal cortex and areas involved in episodic memory. It comes on fast, producing powerful visions and allowing for deep introspection; like doing 10 years of therapy in a matter of hours, say the psychonauts.

But let's put aside, for a moment, what psychedelics do. Whom are they *for*? People who are hurting, struggling to stay afloat? Or are they a beautiful new tool for the type of questing, ambitious leader who feels called upon to build companies that change the world and who might also sense the imperative to better understand their own mind—what kind of leader they will need to be, what kind of person—to shoulder that burden? Is psychedelic therapy for





self-repair or self-actualization? A treatment or a brain hack? Are the compounds a medicine or a vitamin? The answer is YES. After all, the suffering soul and the visionary leader are often the same person—often at the same time.

“I’d say the reason why people are inspired by psychedelics,” says Rick Doblin, founder of the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS), the unofficial NIH of psychedelic research, “is that it helps them change the story of their lives.”

That’s certainly the case for Mona Patel. Patel launched and ran her own UX firm, Motivate Design, managing up to 50 employees and clients such as Coca-Cola and Venmo, for nearly 13 years, until she realized, with the aid of psychedelic medicine, that she was getting burned out. One of her obstacles was rooted in growing up in an immigrant Indian family of entrepreneurs. “I thought the more I achieved, the more people loved me,” she says. “My relationship with achievement is part of what I’m healing through this work.”

She started down this path five years ago, experimenting with microdosing, taking 125 milligrams of psilocybin every morn-

ing. For a while it made her sleepy, but she also noticed a brightness in mood, an extra spark of creativity, a widening of her perspective. She felt it stimulating all the clarifying parts of her brain that she uses for her marketing work, and soon she graduated from microdoses to doses strong enough to send her on a hallucinogenic journey for the better part of a lazy Saturday.

“The big aha! that happens with psilocybin—if you surrender—is that you see how your ego is limiting you by keeping you safe,” Patel says. “So all the things you think you know, and think you believe, and think are right, get chilled out. All the voices you have in your head that you try to quiet, they lose power.”

It’s no accident that places like Holos tend to attract a certain breed of driven professionals, especially founders, whose egos power their greatest achievements but can also blind them to their faults. These are also people who are working their brains while carrying the weight of a range of mental health issues. “Most founders and executives will tell you they suffer from insomnia, burnout, or rumination stress and anxiety,” says Mindbloom’s Beynon. In his personal experience, and in

what he’s seen with his clients, psychedelics seem to reverse the gears of the negative feedback loops. “You hear a lot of founders and creatives talk about how psychedelic medicines can have these transformational benefits,” Beynon says. “Those same effects create massive amounts of creativity and lateral thinking, and build a lot of resiliency, so that they can handle the day-to-day stress of building a high-growth or high-impact company.”

**T**he word of the week in the Diamante Valley is *container*, and the sanctity of the container is the reason why what happens at these retreats remains a mystery to outsiders. In this respect, the code of Las Vegas applies at Holos: What happens inside the container stays inside the container.

Indeed, I was invited to attend this particular center—there are dozens of such places outside of U.S. jurisdiction—only after multiple Zoom calls with each facilitator, individually and in tandem, and only after agreeing to strict conditions to ensure the comfort and privacy of the other nine guests, and only then after each one offered consent.

It’s in this context that I’ve changed the names of our facilitators. I’ve rechristened the guide who led our group conversations and rang the bell to wake us in the morning Jared, after the character from *Silicon Valley*, who was also gentle, compassionate, and very tall, and who stood a bit slouched, as though he were sheepish about his height. He’d guided psychedelic journeys for executives at some of your favorite search engines, but he needs to remain anonymous, for a bit longer, because those executives might not want to be connected to these activities on LinkedIn just yet. Even many backers who have given millions to the cause won’t discuss it publicly. One who declined to talk to me about her support was Alexandra Cohen, wife of Steve Cohen, the multibillionaire hedge fund manager whose foundation funds a psychedelic research and health initiative and has donated nearly \$19 million to various grantees, including \$5.2 million to MAPS.

Time and again during my reporting, founders would tell me every detail of their journeys, and then clam up the moment I asked to use their name. One founder in New York who runs an investment busi-



ness said that he's bullish on psychedelic therapy in private—he's been a psychonaut for over 10 years—but literally cannot afford to be in public. "My ability to be on record in an article of this nature," he said, "is severely impaired by the potential for an extremely negative reaction to the fact that the person they're investing their millions of dollars with takes mushrooms."

Beynon told me a story about a close friend of his, the founder of a company with a nine-figure valuation, who'd recently gone on his first psychedelic retreat but was afraid to share the experience with his executive team. Then, over dinner at an offsite, the topic of psychedelic therapy came up, and the founder asked gingerly if any of his team had ever tried it. Fourteen hands went up—everyone at the table. "He said, 'Everybody was stunned that everybody else's hand was raised,'" says Beynon.

Still, make no mistake, Jared—real name or not—was essential to the process at Holos. He and the other three facilitator performed together like a string quartet, each blessed with a gift for arriving beside you an instant before you realized you needed them. "They weren't invisible," as one guest put it, "but it sure wasn't about them." Common sense called for applying the same care and scrutiny to choosing a psychedelic facilitator that one would bring to choosing, say, a back surgeon. You don't want to botch this, either.

While the facilitators were getting comfortable with me, I was conducting my own screening process, seeing as how it'd be my brain in their care. Even more so than by our discussions about what I hoped to get out of this process, I was persuaded, even humbled, by the stories they told about their own journeys, particularly the three women who worked alongside Jared (I've changed their names, too). Each found strength in psychedelics to navigate rivet-

ing personal transformations.

There was Sara, a former U.S. Marine, raised on a blueberry farm in rural Georgia, who was on active duty the night in September 2012 that the Taliban attacked Camp Bastion in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, killing two Americans and wounding 17 people. Her experience with sexual assault survivors in the military led to a connection with Sheryl Sandberg, which led to an inner-circle job at Facebook, which led to her getting the hell out of tech; at each step, plant medicine helped guide her way until it became her whole way. There was Deborah, whose devout Mormon past left her so desperate for answers that she nearly left this world. There was Abigail, who had her dream job as a private chef for a Bay Area family until she was home alone with their 6-year-old daughter and the little girl lay down for a nap and never woke up. The trauma of that and the sudden accidental death of her father robbed her of her passion for cooking, until plant medicine helped her heal. A trio of women who'd each used psychedelic therapy and emerged with hard-earned equanimity.

I felt at ease in their care.

**T**he last headline I read before we all surrendered our phones upon arrival at Holos was election day news out of Colorado about the official passage of Proposition 122, which will legalize the supervised therapeutic use of psilocybin mushrooms at state-licensed treatment centers by late 2024. Colorado was joining Oregon, which passed a similar measure in 2020 and began permitting supervised use of psychedelics on January 1, 2023. As of New Year's Day, a passport is no longer needed to go on this type of guided psilocybin journey without breaking the law; a plane ticket to Portland will do.

Though Oregon's measure includes a local opt-out clause, which 25 of the state's 36 counties have already exercised—thus reducing the anticipated scope of legalization—the political momentum is unmistakable. From January 2019 through September 2022, 25 states introduced 74 pieces of legislation related to psychedelics. Colorado governor Jared Polis has appointed a Natural Medicine Advisory Board stocked with experts in mycology, medicine, public health, insurance, religion, and criminal justice reform to build a regulatory apparatus for guided journeys. Legislators in at least 10 more states, including deep-red Missouri and Montana, are introducing reform measures with bipartisan support—a remarkable swing in the politics of psychedelics due almost entirely to the mounting evidence of their therapeutic value for war veterans with severe PTSD.

In the U.S. Congress, polar opposites Matt Gaetz and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have both supported research bills.

The FDA designated psilocybin a breakthrough therapy in 2018, paving the way for a cascade of clinical trials. A record 13 studies on psilocybin were launched in 2020 alone, according to *Nature*, and the results are landing in medical journals every few months. *JAMA Psychiatry*, in August 2022, reported on a study of the use of psychedelics to treat alcoholism that found that just two doses of psilocybin, paired with psychotherapy, led to an 83 percent decline in heavy drinking among the participants. By the end of the eight-month trial, nearly half had stopped drinking entirely. *Nature Medicine*, in May 2021, reported on MDMA-assisted therapy for severe PTSD, the first Phase 3 study of its kind, in which 67 percent of the participants no longer qualified for the diagnosis just 18 weeks after treatment.

The FDA's blessing of ketamine for prescription use means treatment may be covered by insurance, and MDMA is up next, with mescaline expected further down the line. Imagine—a whole new medicine cabinet with the potential to replace many of the mood-disorder pills crowding it now even though those big pharma options don't work for nearly enough people.

While Doblin's MAPS may be mission-driven, others are keener for a financial upside. In this gestational period, as scientists and policymakers do their work, startups are circling, waiting to be cleared for



**I thought ketamine would be a wedge into the market to help us build a brand so we would be prepared to add these other medicines."**

—Mindbloom founder and CEO Dylan Beynon

landing. Ketamine is still priced as a luxury item; a psychiatrist-assisted starter course at early movers like Nushama, which has a psychedelic wellness center in Midtown Manhattan, or Cambridge Biotherapies in the Boston area cost around \$5,000—nearly the price of a week with the company that ran our retreat at Holos. Waitlists for therapist-assisted courses are months long. Field Trip Health, a three-year-old Canadian company that trades on Canada's TSX Venture Exchange and the OTC Markets Group, has raised \$96.2 million to finance dozens of high-end ketamine clinics in Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, and other North American cities. Or you can sign up for a telehealth session of ketamine with Mindbloom for \$195.

Further out on the horizon are synthetic psychedelics, or non-psychedelic psychedelics, which Stanford University's Wu Tsai Neurosciences Institute described as the "white whale" of psychedelic medicine. That hasn't discouraged them from the hunt, not with all that VC money pouring into it. German pharma billionaire Christian Angermayer, who did mushrooms in 2014 and called it "the single most meaningful thing I've ever done in my whole life, full stop," has backed two startups all the way onto the Nasdaq, including Compass Pathways, a psychedelics development company valued at \$450 million, which patented its synthetic psilocybin product, COM360, in 2020. Natural or synthetic, visionary or mercenary, according to InsightAce Analytic, the psychedelic therapeutics market, worth about \$3.6 billion in 2021, is projected to hit \$8.3 billion by 2028.

Most of these companies are years away from seeing clients, let alone real revenue, and there's a healthy portion of the academic community that believes that's for the best. The American Psychiatric Association tried to tap the brakes with a position paper it issued in July 2022, drafted by Carolyn Rodriguez of Wu Tsai Neurosciences Institute, and the closing line is oddly tepid: "There is the risk that use of psychedelics for purported clinical goals may outpace evidence-based research and regulatory approval." It's fair to say that ship has sailed.

**P**sychedelics can work miracles, but they're not miracle drugs—a paradox that makes

sense once you've tried them, and maybe only then. They illuminate the reality that we get knocked down in life, we recover, we cruise along again, sometimes for years, and then, *wham*, we get knocked down again. Their psychic healing power can occur on the margins of perception, a tweaking of the dials, a slight widening of your aperture. And it might not last. It might not work at all. "Not everybody gets better," Doblin says. The older we get, the more people we come to know who lose the battles with their demons; plant medicine will not save them all. That's how other medicines work too: Sometimes they don't.

So let's be very clear about one thing: Psychedelic therapy requires work. For all the stories of people whose OCD simply switched off after one session of MDMA, or whose lifelong depression lifted like a veil with ketamine, or heavy drinkers going cold turkey after two psilocybin treatments, there are innumerable others whose experiences are less immediate. Profound, yes, but not instantly transformative.

At Holos, much of our work in the weeks prior to our arrival and during our first 24 hours together was focused on intentionality—one of those woo-woo terms that's really just another way of saying "planning ahead." The MAPS protocol uses the term *set*, as in mindset—the notion of being purposeful going into the journey, talking through what you're hoping to accomplish, orienting your brain so that it gets swept off in the right direction. The intention you set is a proposed plan for your journey, written in pencil, because the medicine may have its own plans.

The MAPS protocol's sister to *set* is *setting*—your surroundings. Are you in a safe environment, being supervised by someone sober with experience handling people deep-diving into their psyche?

Holos certainly checked that box. Sitting on my yoga mat under the palapa during our first group conversation on our first full day, before I even knew the names of the people circled up around me, I was sharing my intention for the journey ahead—barring the details of my most personal struggles to help the medicine locate their root causes, all of which seemed to have burrowed themselves deep into my chronically achy lower back. Or maybe the roots of my pain go even deeper, back to the traumas of

childhood, where all the wild things await us. Maybe I didn't want to know.

I was reassured to hear that all these highly accomplished people were wrestling with things as challenging as my back, and often far less easy to pinpoint. As everyone spoke, our guides encouraged us to be flexible with our intention, to let it be shaped by what others shared in our circle. Intention-setting, I learned, works more like a suggestion box for your predesired mind than a to-do list, and if something upends you, all your carefully considered intentions will scatter to the wind, and the medicine will force you to face what's right in front of you. One aphorism of psychedelic therapy is that you get the journey you need, not the journey you want.

Riding on psilocybin, your mind can and will go places unfamiliar to your consciousness, but even as the sky around us slowly darkened—the only way I could be sure time was still passing on my medicine day—I was surprised to find you can still guide it. During my nine hours under the palapa, I kept noticing how easily, how frictionlessly I could coast through my thoughts and access dormant memories, like swinging through trees. But I could also see the neuropathways that led me to them. It was as though the psilocybin had lighted a chandelier of tea candles in my brain, and all I had to do was follow the flickers.

All around me, for the rest of the day and into the night, I saw people in the unmistakable throes of a life-altering something. I saw bodies pendulum from agony to exhilaration, from dance fever to heaving sobs. I caught bits of eloquent self-reflection in conversations with our guides.

My own experience differed because I was there to observe *and* to participate, to work on myself *and* do my job, an unavoidable Heisenbergian paradox that was bound to impact one or the other. It was a long journey, though. Plenty of time for both.

**I**t took a historic convergence of forces in science, academia, business, and politics to reach this threshold, plus what Doblin calls "this gradual disillusionment" with the war on drugs. "People are more open to a nuanced perspective of psychedelics," Doblin says.

MAPS is a massive operation, not some subterranean foraging club. It's the origi-

nal psychedelics startup, really, the foundation of the movement, with reach into its every corner. MAPS consists of a research and education arm with 40 employees, and a public benefit corporation that employs 140 people, mostly neuroscientists, pharmacologists, and regulatory specialists. Pending FDA approval, the PBC is eligible for a five-year window of exclusivity to market MDMA-assisted therapy for PTSD. MAPS is scaling to train 25,000 therapists over the next 10 years, treat more than 1.6 million PTSD patients, and generate income of \$1 billion or more. “The most important thing right now,” Doblin says, “is qualified, trained therapists. But it’s also the most expensive and the most delicate.”

Until hundreds of applicants complete the hundred-hour training program (tuition: \$5,000) to become official state-licensed facilitators, few are going on licensed psilocybin retreats in Oregon. It

could take a year to unjam the bottleneck.

Meanwhile, the barriers of access to a healthy guided experience will remain daunting. There’s no Kayak for psilocybin retreats, no comparison shopping, no Google reviews. Credibility travels by word of mouth, and the underground community is filled with gold diggers, god complexes, and garden-variety flakes. It’s easy to spend thousands of dollars and travel thousands of miles only to discover that you’re being groomed for a cult. “I’ve been on the wrong end of this,” one Holos guest told me. “Let’s say the shaman’s name is Tim, and you get there and realize, ‘Oh, this is the Tim Show.’”

The maturation of the psychedelic therapy industry in America will—hopefully—bring with it more credibility and transparency, focused not on groovy magic carpet rides but rather on what Michael Pollan, author of *How to Change Your Mind*, the new testament of the modern psychedelic movement, has called “the betterment of well people.” The idea carries echoes of the Esalen Institute, the famed humanistic educational retreat center known for its integral role in the Human Potential Movement of the 1960s. Holos co-founder Alex Enchin is already exploring locations in Colorado for a second retreat center that he wants to be “the next Esalen.”

The thing is, it should never have taken this long. The notion of psychedelics as a tool for creative problem-solving goes back to the earliest days of sociological research on the compounds, in the 1940s and early 1950s, before a clinical psychologist named Timothy Leary cracked open a fault line in the social sciences with his Harvard Psilocybin Project. In 1966, on the opposite coast in Menlo Park, California, James Fadiman, a Harvard-trained psychologist, and Willis Harman, a Stanford professor of engineering, published the results of a study—FDA-approved—in which they’d gathered up dozens of brilliant people in the area including senior scientists, architects, engineers, and mathematicians, all of whom had one thing in a common: a scientific problem they’d been struggling with for three months and so far failed to solve.

“The reason we wanted them to have struggled,” Fadiman once wrote, “is we wanted them to have emotional blocks by this time, meaning when the client’s been mad at you for three months, when you’re trying to earn a living and your supervisor

is saying, ‘Are you making no progress?’” And after just one dose of LSD or mescaline, which they issued interchangeably, “the solutions rolled out with amazing regularity.” Soon they were turning people away.

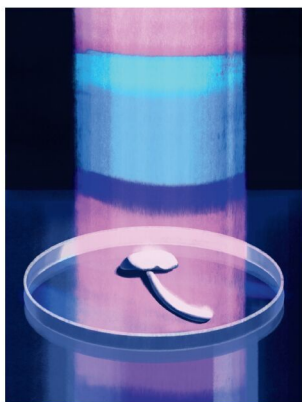
But for the past half century, and really for the first time in human history, the use of psychedelics has been a serious crime. Nixon put all of it on ice when, in 1970, his administration established the Controlled Substances Act and piled psychedelics onto Schedule I, as if to kill off the counterculture by writing it into federal code. In the process, he buried the mounting scientific research that psychedelics weren’t just promising medicines for the afflicted, but for all of us, because we’re all a bit broken.

Johns Hopkins University managed to mete out its remaining supply of psychedelics and continue its research, subsisting on crumbs, until the mid-1970s, when all those ideas about leadership and creative problem-solving—all that potential—moved underground, plodding along beneath the topsoil, not unlike a network of fungi. Then in 2020, the university launched the Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research, which was funded by a \$17 million gift from the Cohens, author Tim Ferriss, WordPress co-founder Matt Mullenweg, Toms founder Blake Mycoskie, and investor Craig Nerenberg.

On a mushroom day, shortly after dawn, while stretching on the floor of my damp tent, I slipped ever so slightly and felt the telltale spasm in my lower back that I knew meant three to five days of discomfort. Day one, today, would particularly suck. I swore at myself. My appetite fled. In the weeks leading up to the retreat, I’d felt no trepidation about it, but I’d read enough, prepared enough, to know this would impact my journey, and might even thrust it into a leading role.

“We like to say that difficult is not the same as bad,” Doblin would tell me later. “People have to be prepared for difficult experiences because life is difficult.” What he’s getting at, of course, is the dreaded “bad trip,” the specter of which might dissuade as many people from psychedelics as the lingering taboo.

But what is a bad trip? A psychotic episode? Or does it just describe a journey that’s way less fun than you anticipated? What if the difference between a bad trip and a therapeutic one is simply a matter



**The most important thing right now is trained therapists, but it’s also the most expensive.”**

— MAPS founder  
Rick Doblin



of switching the labels on the bottle? “I never went into a psychedelic trip being like, ‘Oh, this is gonna be so fun,’” says Dan Poneman, an NBA agent whose experience with psychedelics helped him build his own agency, and also know when it was time to exit. “It’s the opposite: It’s like going into battle. Most of my trips would be classified as bad trips, where I would have to really fight with my shit and come out feeling better.”

*You get the journey you need, not the journey you want.*

Describing a psychedelic journey is a lot like sharing vacation photos—a little goes a long way.

During mine, between shifting from my side to my back to my stomach to relieve my lumbar pain, I scribbled notes occasionally. I tried to keep them short to maximize the chance that any of it might make sense later. One read: “Swimming with sharks.”

You know how, when you shut your eyes in a well-lit room and stare at the inside of your eyelids, you can see these faint aqueous lines squiggling? It’s just the light shining through the skin, illuminating a thin network of tiny veins. But on psilo-



**In plant medicine, there’s nothing more powerful than the sense of connectedness.”**

—Author Keith Ferrazzi

cybin, those squiggles look like waves or, more precisely, a swift current deep below the surface of the ocean.

As soon as my thoughts turn to the ocean, they invariably turn to sharks, and when that occurred I beat the psilocybin down that tea-candle-lighted path to the childhood memory. I knew exactly where it was going: the time when I was 7 years old, and my father had us for the weekend, and we went to the mov-

ies to see *Jaws 3-D*. And good for him, in retrospect. All I have ever remembered from that afternoon is sitting there in my cardboard 3-D glasses, watching a severed arm drift toward my 7-year-old face. That is precisely when my lifelong terror of sharks, and by extension, the ocean—or really anybody of water in which I can’t see my feet—took root. I wasn’t in Costa Rica to fix my shark phobia, but I went back to that night as a child, after the lights went out. Nightmare after nightmare, waking up shrieking, bleary-eyed, exhausted, my newly solo father out of his depth. And yet as formative as I knew that night was, I’d forgotten the particulars. Now it was as though the medicine was handing me a dusty box of Super 8 reels.

At some point, my attention shifted back to that flowing current inside my eyelids, and a phrase popped into my head: “Swimming with sharks.” My brain was demanding that I consider it. Many weeks later I’m still sorting through what it means, and how it all connects to my work, my back, my family, my kids.

What I think it’s about, though, is how so many times in life we feel like we’re

being forced to jump into a vast ocean, and how it can seem like there's nothing but hungry sharks circling down there, but in reality, there's no blood in the water. They're minding their own business, dealing with their own problems, the pressure of needing to keep moving or die. We're not swimming with sharks in life, either.

As night settled over the valley, the downpour around us got biblical. Booms of thunder rocked the ridgeline, and as the medicine cycled out of our systems and we sat on our mats in hazy silence sipping sweet-potato soup, I thought ahead to the next morning, and our scheduled group outing to a pair of nearby waterfalls with natural swimming holes, and how nothing could have sounded better in that exact moment to my stiff, grimy, sweaty, stinking carcass than a purifying plunge into a crisp pool of cold mountain water. Assuming, that was, my lower back would be in any condition for the steep hike down the path.

Maybe it was the medicine, maybe it was all those generous huddled conversations with our virtuosic guides, or maybe I just wanted to jump into that swimming hole so desperately that I willed my muscles to surrender and unclench. All I know is, the day after mushroom day, when I woke up, my back didn't hurt anymore.

**M**y first guide on this journey was Keith Ferrazzi, the Inc. contributor, best-selling creative-leadership author, entrepreneur, and human plant-medicine Rolodex. He'd offered kind reassurances before I left for Costa Rica, and it seemed only right to circle back with him after I'd unpacked everything. He'd know the answer to the question hanging over all this: What would happen if every founder in America did what I had done? His response arrived via lengthy voice memo, as is his wont:

"An entrepreneur friend of mine who was deeply affected by psilocybin said he used to live his life trying to control everything. Now he lets go and allows empowerment around him, and what's interesting is that people have stepped up and achieved more. As a result, he's actually gone higher.

"In plant medicine, there's nothing more powerful than the sense of connectedness as opposed to individualism—I gotta do this myself! You start to see how interdependency is so beautiful and brings value. And so if entrepreneurs did this

work they would have much more appreciation for setting a new standard—what their team is capable of, what is possible.

"Then, of course, this breakthrough thinking would cascade into the organization and people would begin to feel this and it would cascade into families and cascade into society and cascade into the philanthropies they support and perhaps even into government. I mean, if the entrepreneurs transform what is expected, everyone's contributions would have to meet a new standard."

It's quite a vision.

**T**he healing begins, typically, when mushroom day ends.

That was your adventure at sea, thrilling and stormy, punctuated by periods of elation and periods of nausea. This next part—*integration*, in the parlance—is where we take our wobbly first few steps back ashore, and get reaccustomed to terra firma. It's when we need our guides the most. For my group at Holos, it began the very next day, under the palapa, sharing where our journeys took us and taking our first stabs at sorting through what it all meant.

Integration, when you can take advantage of that newfound neuroplasticity, continues for weeks, or at least it should. One quick way to tell if you've signed up with a company interested in your well-being is the level of resources it dedicates to this aspect of the process. My integration consisted of four hourlong Zoom calls with each of our four guides, like a series of check-ins with a therapist, each providing a fresh vantage point. Jared, Sara, Deborah, and Abigail had all seen me at the rawest I've been in my adult life, and even though I spent half of our time interviewing them, I also made more progress on myself than I ever have over years of therapy. People who go on psychedelic journeys say things like this a lot, and integration is where the real work gets done, without any drugs.

One person who's seen this up close is Eric Nielsen, who's been pursuing psychedelics for healing since 2015 and founded Mission B to provide consulting to business leaders. "I'm not saying ingesting psychedelics equals transformation," Nielsen says. "There's a key step, which is getting really serious about where you're an asshole. You could do psychedelics and not do integration and become a bigger

asshole, too—as blind to your blind spots as you have ever been. Yet, having done psychedelics, you'll be righteous about it. That happens."

The focus on integration is a departure from the early days of Fadiman and Harman, when the novelty of the experimentation left little room for much consideration of what happens after they wear off. After a half-century pause, that mindset has returned in some academic quarters, where a kind of neuropsychological debate has opened up. Is it the drugs themselves doing the healing? Or do they function more like a catalyst that ripens our brains for healing, and it's the subsequent deep and often difficult personal excavation that changes us?

We still don't know, but how the question gets resolved has vast implications for the shape of the future commercial psychedelics industry. If the journey turns out to be all noise and no signal, why not try to engineer out the messy, scary stuff? And once you've eliminated the painful components of a psychedelic experience, then why do we need all this (costly, time-consuming) integration? "The ideal psychedelic treatment," declared a recent article out of the Wu Tsai Neurosciences Institute, "would drastically streamline this therapeutic process, reducing psychedelic therapy to nothing more than a simple, safe-to-use pill."

*The ideal psychedelic treatment.* Would it be, though? I can say for my own part that upon returning home from Costa Rica, I noticed I was more deliberate about my writing process, more intentional about protecting my back, more proactive about my set and setting—things I've known for years that I needed to do, but this time, for some reason, I finally just did them. Leadership isn't a big theme in my work life, but maybe the medicine was helping me do a better job leading myself. That was another insight that scampered through my head under the palapa with its amazing patterned roof and the dangling flower lamp. Another clear vision of a brighter, healthier, wide-open future, an evolution in human betterment carved from the rawest of materials, as it so often is, by entrepreneurs who are willing to risk everything to get there first. 🍄

DEVIN GORDON is a writer living in Brookline, Massachusetts.







# MAKING AMERICAN DREAMS

## WHILE BUILDING THE BY KEVIN J. RYAN AMERICAN DREAM

ATTORNEY ALEXANDRA LOZANO  
RADICALLY REINVENTED THE LAW FIRM  
TO CREATE OPPORTUNITY FOR  
CLIENTS, HERSELF, AND SMALL  
BUSINESSES FROM COAST TO COAST.

# IN 2016, IMMIGRATION LAWYER ALEXANDRA LOZANO DECIDED TO TRY A CASE THAT SEEMED HOPELESS.

The client, an undocumented Mexican immigrant from Monterrey, Mexico, named Manuel, had been living in the Seattle area since coming to the U.S. in 2001. He'd gotten an off-the-books job washing dishes at a social club downtown and worked his way up to management. He'd briefly returned to Mexico to visit his family and then reentered the U.S. illegally a second time, which made him ineligible to earn authorized status. Several immigration lawyers told him that his case was unwinnable.

But Lozano chose to accept his case. She had learned that Manuel had previously been in an abusive relationship with a woman who was a U.S. citizen. And under a provision of the Violence Against Women Act, undocumented women who had been abused by their spouses were eligible to obtain work permits and green cards in the United States. Reading the law closely, Lozano believed it could be applied to men in similar situations. When a judge agreed, Manuel won authorized status, giving him the ability to secure a job with benefits and travel freely to see his family in Monterrey.

"Sometimes you need to

approach things differently than everyone else does," says Lozano. And in this instance, her novel approach would affect her life in ways she couldn't have anticipated.

Today, as founder of Seattle-based Alexandra Lozano Immigration Law, the 38-year-old helps immigrants win authorization by way of green cards, work permits, permanent residency, and citizenship. Often, she uses rarely applied provisions from niche areas of American legislation to win her cases. So successful has she been at this that her clients have taken to calling her *la Abogada de los Milagros*—the Lawyer of Miracles.

But Lozano has done more than help hopeful immigrants secure their dreams. She is also helping Americans secure theirs—as entrepreneurs and employees. The U.S. is currently home to an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants, according to the nonprofit Center for Immigration Studies, many of whom have fled poverty or violence in their home countries, risking their lives to cross the border. They have lived and worked here for decades, and are integral to the U.S. economy.

And not just off the books, but in the mainstream economy as well. According to Pew Research, authorized immigrants represented 13 percent of the U.S. workforce in 2017—21.2 million people in all. And immigrants are a key part of America's startup culture. As of 2017, the most recent year for which data is available, an estimated eight million people in the U.S. were employed at immigrant-owned businesses, which accounted for \$1.3 trillion in revenue. According to the National Foundation for American Policy, nearly two-thirds of U.S. billion-dollar startups were founded or co-founded by immigrants or the children of immigrants.

Into this fray Lozano has leaped—and taken up the task of helping America's undocumented immigrants cross the divide from the hidden economy into the open air. She's provided a labor pool for short-staffed enterprises and created jobs at the businesses immigrants start themselves. In many cases, she's doing this on behalf of immigrants who've been here for a decade or more and tried unsuccessfully to gain legal status, often held up by past mistakes, like a prior

arrest, that can disqualify them.

Such cases have become a specialty for Lozano Immigration Law. The firm currently closes more than 700 cases per month and had revenue of \$24 million in 2019, landing it at No. 247 on the 2022 Inc. 5000 list. Last year, revenue more than doubled to \$54 million. In the past four years, the firm has grown from 15 employees to more than 350. And Lozano has made all of this happen by rethinking the very notion of a law firm from the ground up—how it is structured, how it grows, and how it handles its cases.

**Lozano's career** has its roots in her own life story. The granddaughter of immigrants from Italy and the Czech Republic, she was born and raised in Ocala, Florida. When she was 16, she took a service trip with her local church to an impoverished town in Belize. There, a woman approached her, a baby in her arms, and asked if Lozano could bring the child back to the U.S. "To think about what she must have been going through to need to do that," Lozano recalls. "It really stuck with me." The trip ignited in her a desire to serve the Latino community. She majored in Spanish in college and became fluent in the language.

Lozano went on to earn her law degree from Seattle University. After graduating in 2008, she worked at several firms that specialized in immigration cases, today a \$6 billion industry in the U.S. The experience was disillusioning. "I always heard clients say, 'My lawyer never calls me. They never pick up the phone. I don't know what's going on in my case,'" she says. She founded her own firm to put a different sort of system into action.

In the world of law, para-

legals generally get assigned to cases and see them through from beginning to end. But paralegals are human. They get busy; a particular case or client might not hold their interest. That allows plenty of chances for cases to stall.

Lozano, who reads three or four business books a week, had just finished *The E-Myth Attorney*, which encourages lawyers to approach their firms as businesses. She knew she had to redesign her firm if it was ever to handle workflow more efficiently.

The moment that new approach came into focus occurred, of all places, on a cruise ship. There, Lozano observed the liner's staff in action: the greeters, the chefs, the servers, the housekeepers, the entertainers. "These people have been working on this ship for months, and they greet new people every single week as if it's their first time," she says. "They're receiving you with a smile, they're singing songs and dancing around, and creating an amazing time for passengers. And I thought, 'How can we make a law firm like this, where we use people who are experts at their jobs to create the best possible experience?'"

At the time, Lozano's firm had just over a dozen employees. To create the cruise-ship model she envisioned, Lozano broke the firm down into specialized departments to work on the various aspects of a case. There would be the client service department that would intake the case; investigators who'd verify the client's story and gather evidence; legal preparation, which would put together the documentation and write the legal arguments; and then a final review with an attorney. A case would move from one department to the next like a legal assembly line. Instead of each case being the

province of one person, all case knowledge would be centralized.

She didn't get it entirely right at first. Some roles originally designed for one person were eventually split among two or more. She soon realized she needed to install department supervisors for oversight. But, overall, the process made the firm remarkably efficient. Today, Lozano's goal is to submit a client's green card application—a process that can take months or years—within a week of being retained.

The system has also made the firm easily scalable, which would prove to be critical. A few months after launching, Lozano created social media handles for the company on Facebook and Instagram, where she would host live Q&A's and informational clinics for immigrant families, a practice she continues today. The sessions not only help immigrants glean information, but also double as a way for potential clients to discover the firm. In 2020, Lozano tried her

hand at TikTok. She made a video in which she described the outcomes of some of her successful cases. The video went viral, racking up half a million views in a week. Lozano had tapped a nerve.

The video opened Lozano's eyes to the notion that she could serve clients all over the country. The firm was deluged by consultation requests. Still, law is an old-fashioned industry in which most clients prefer in-person meetings. So, instead of trying to meet with them virtually, Lozano opened additional offices. In 2022, the firm had locations in Los Angeles, Houston, San Antonio, and Chicago—all aided by the firm's assembly-line system, which she could easily replicate at each new office. "I call myself an accidental businessperson," she says with a laugh. "Growing to be this size was never part of the plan. I was just looking for the best ways to serve my clients."

As the company grew, she hired remote staff across the U.S. and in several Latin Amer-

ican countries, including large contingents in Mexico and Colombia. The vast majority of her employees speak Spanish, which allows them to communicate more easily with clients. Many employees have themselves been affected by U.S. immigration laws. And Lozano has been able to turn their predicaments into an advantage for both her clients and her company.

Case in point: Amy Ríos, one of Lozano's first hires. Ríos grew up in Milwaukee, where she met her husband, Luis, a factory worker who had immigrated to Wisconsin from Durango, Mexico, as a child in 1991. His family had no documentation, and in 2009, ICE showed up at Luis's place of work and detained him in an immigration raid. The couple fought in court for more than two years before Luis was deported in 2012. They then spent two years apart, with Ríos and their daughter living in the U.S. and Luis in Juárez. Eventually, the family decided to reunite and settle down in



Alexandra Lozano, at the family ranch outside Seattle, helped Manuel (left) win his immigration case with a novel legal strategy. He is now her VP of finance—and her husband.

Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, where they joined a community of expats living in similar circumstances.

After meeting Ríos in a Facebook group for families dealing with immigration issues, Lozano heard her story and tapped her to be her assistant. Ríos climbed the ranks and is now director of legal operations, overseeing many of the firm's cases while working remotely from Mexico.

"My husband and I were able to survive two years of lawyer fees and fighting, and two years of being separated," says Ríos. "We made it in the end, but there are a lot of other families who don't. Now, every day, I get to help make sure that other families never have to hurt the way we did."

Ríos's rise through the firm isn't uncommon. Lozano puts an emphasis on training that will give attorney-level expertise to every employee, in order to create an upwardly mobile

organization. "Someone really can see their path from customer service all the way to the highest level of paralegal," she says. "That helps them feel empowered."

Lozano credits much of the firm's success with the fact that she operates it like a startup, always tinkering, perpetually innovating. "We see everything as an experiment," she says. "We're constantly iterating and looking for ways to improve, never thinking that what we've done is good enough."

**For many immigrants,** the perilous journey to the United States arose from a yearning for economic freedom and safety for their family. Lozano has experienced a similar commingling of interests—her clients and their family members becoming employees, and, with one person, a good deal more.

Lozano had seen something unique in Manuel, the Monterrey native with the "unwinnable" case, for whom she won authorization in 2016. After Manuel had obtained his work permit, she had been struck by the curiosity and intelligence with which he embraced the subject of immigration, far beyond a mere interest in the outcome of his own case. "He was very passionate about the work we did," she says. "He seemed like someone who could bring the soul to our company." She offered him a job at her firm, an administrative role with health benefits that he couldn't have held before he was documented. Romance soon sparked; the two fell in love; they married in 2017. Today, they have five children, and Manuel Lozano, 39, is the firm's vice president of finance and in the process of earning his citizenship.

For Lozano, the search for novel legal strategies like the one she used to win authoriza-

tion for Manuel became a *modus operandi*. Karla Pinedo, a native of Nayarit, Mexico, would have her life transformed by the approach. Back in 2003, after two failed attempts, Pinedo had crossed the border into the U.S. before settling down in Washington State and marrying a U.S. citizen. Her prior deportations made her ineligible for permanent status; she lived in constant fear. Several times Pinedo met with lawyers, who all declared her case hopeless and charged a consultation fee for a few minutes of talking.

Pinedo didn't try again for another decade, evading deportation by obeying the law and paying her taxes. Finally, in 2014, a friend persuaded her to meet with Lozano. Their first conversation lasted for hours. "She wanted to know my whole life story," recalls Pinedo. "She was very honest from the beginning. She said, 'It won't be easy. It's going to take time, and it might not work.'" At first, it didn't. Lozano was able to get Pinedo a temporary work permit, but her request for permanent status was denied. She lost again on appeal.

Then Lozano shifted tacks. Under a provision of the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, U.S. immigrants who are victims of human trafficking are eligible for a T visa—legal documentation that puts them on track to earn a green card. Lozano built a case that argued Pinedo was a victim of human trafficking because of the excessive work she had been forced to do at home by her husband, whom she'd since divorced.

The argument carried: Pinedo was granted a T visa in 2022. "I had been thinking, 'What if I have to go back to Mexico with my three kids?'" says Pinedo. "They've been here their whole life. They

Lozano, pictured in New York City's Jackson Heights, says: "I wanted to give immigrants the VIP treatment they so rarely get here."

would be going to a country that they don't really know, a country with a lot of crime and violence." The case took eight years and cost thousands of dollars, but for Pinedo the ordeal was worth it.

Meanwhile, Lozano intends to keep expanding. Potential new locations for 2023 include Georgia and Florida, two states in which undocumented people can be deported simply for driving without proper credentials. "Something small like a driver's license is easy for Americans to take for granted," says Lozano. "But for them it's life-changing. Now they can go to work, bring their kids to school, and know that they're not going to get deported."

All in a day's work for the CEO of a fast-growing company and an attorney tasked with handling the most important legal battle of people's lives. Lozano feels the weight of that responsibility. But while other attorneys might turn away clients who seem likely to lose, Lozano says that it's the very people her firm represents who inspire her to confront forces that might otherwise seem stronger than she is.

"My clients left their country unable to speak English," she says. "They didn't know where they were going. They crossed a desert, got to America, found a way to get a job. They've taken a lot of risks for themselves. So now we have to take one for them. We're fearless. We're not scared to fail." **Q**

— KEVIN J. RYAN is a freelance writer who lives in Queens, New York.

  
**GROWING TO BE THIS SIZE WAS NEVER PART OF THE PLAN. I WAS JUST LOOKING FOR THE BEST WAYS TO SERVE MY CLIENTS."**



# Inc. 5000 CONFERENCE & GALA

OCTOBER 19 - 21, 2022 PHOENIX, ARIZONA

Success Inspired and Celebrated



Elizabeth Cutler and Daymond John

"The opportunity to learn from true business visionaries and to network with terrific entrepreneurs from across the country was incredible!"



Chip Conley

"Without a doubt, one of the best networking events I have ever attended. This conference draws the most diverse and innovative humans that are changing the world!"



The conference welcome reception featured an improv session with Wayne Brady.



Attendees enjoyed the disco-themed all-conference party, presented by Capital One Business.

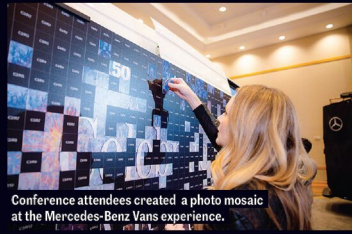


Your Next Move: The Ripple Effect of Disruption, presented by Capital One Business, featuring Laura Modi, Cindy Eckert, and Beatrice Dixon

"The conference exceeded my expectations—everything from the venue to the speakers, networking and gala. The energy of the most successful entrepreneurs in one place was contagious."



Gala co-hosts Amber Ruffin and Rich Eisen



Conference attendees created a photo mosaic at the Mercedes-Benz Vans experience.



Insperty hosted a champagne toast for their clients who had made the Inc. 5000 list.

**"A must for any founder of a fast-growing company."**



Funding the New Wave of Diverse Founders, presented by Principal

**"The Inc. 5000 Conference & Gala is a life-changing and transformative experience. It is a chance for us to learn from the best in business."**

**"This was my first time at the Inc. 5000. Networking with like-minded entrepreneurs who are on the same growth trajectory and experience the same pain points related to rapid growth, is invaluable!"**



Robert Smith



Guests rocked the dance floor after the gala dinner.

**"It was inspiring to be in the same room with like-minded individuals all striving for continued success."**

**"Hands-down the best conference I've ever attended —such a terrific vibe and a real celebration!"**



Phyllis Newhouse, Editor-In-Chief Scott Omelianuk, and Julius Winfield Erving "Dr. J."

**LAST OCTOBER, IN PHOENIX, AZ,**

for the first time in three years, more than 1,500 business leaders of America's fastest-growing private companies convened in person again to celebrate their success at the 41st annual Inc. 5000 Conference & Gala.

Across a three-day agenda equal parts inspiring, informative, and communal gathering, fast-growth founders and teams came face-to-face with peers, serial entrepreneurs, superstars, billionaires, and creators of some of the most exciting brands and businesses on the planet today. As a collective body of business innovation, they make the Inc. 5000 Conference & Gala the most prestigious event in entrepreneurship.

Sponsors hosted enriching activations, engaging experiences, and valued programming that elevated the attendee experience each day, rewarding them with fresh takes, smart strategies, and world-class tools built to keep them growing at speed. The event reached its pinnacle with the conference-closing Inc. 5000 Reception & Black-Tie Gala, hosted by star comedic talents, Amber Ruffin and Rich Eisen, who celebrated the success of the Inc. 5000 with wit and wisdom.

The 42nd annual Inc. 5000 Conference & Gala takes place Tuesday, October 31 - Thursday, November 2, 2023, in San Antonio, TX.

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# Inc.

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# MASTER-BUILT BUSINESS

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SPONSORED BY THE INC. HONOREES WHOSE BRAND PROFILES APPEAR ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES

**W**hen you're aiming to build a fast-growing enterprise, you have to work from the bottom up. Don't overspend on fancy office space when you can start out remote; don't go on a hiring frenzy until you've identified your unmet needs. And, whatever you do, don't start out by pitching your product before you have a semblance of a plan. The key to a sturdy business is to establish, early on, the policies and structures that will get you from point A to point B and point C with as few rehab projects as possible. A sound foundation is less likely to crack over time—or, worse, cave in under the weight of your growing company.

Still, while every venture is different, you can always follow blueprints from the business people who have turned their ideas into veritable skyscrapers. One pro tip: You'll need a reliable team that's familiar with operating amid ambiguity and has firsthand knowledge of running a fast-growing company. Even then, growth can get away from you, so slot in quality-assurance checks along the way. Step back as you pick up speed. Don't fear tweaking the design you once envisioned. So long as your foundation is solid, you can do anything.

Now, don your hardhats, grab your power tools—and let the business-building begin.

# GROW YOUR OWN WAY

## 1 | **Scott Curley** Co-CEO **FINISHLINE TAX SOLUTIONS**

"It's important for us to not be rigid. We're constantly looking for ways to be more efficient and more innovative to maintain a fluid operation through which we may pivot at a moment's notice. That's helped us adapt to the kinds of changes that fast growth commands."

*Plano, Texas-based tax-resolutions firm FinishLine is a 2022 Inc. 5000 honoree.*

## 2 | **Kaleda Connell** CEO **KILO**

"Let everyone be a grownup. We don't micromanage or have many meetings. We trust that everyone will get the work done that they need to get done, and if they don't, it's very apparent, as we are a small team. We reward on the basis of a job well done and not on tenure. We are also very clear that we are a team, not a family."

*Kilo, a Royal Palm Beach, Florida-based management software maker for gym owners, is a 2022 Inc. 5000 honoree.*

## 3 | **Michael Ly** CEO **RECONCILED**

"Make sure your team is on the same page and laser-focused on problem areas that may be slow-

ing down the process. Often the founder is the person who becomes the slow cog in the wheel. I don't get out of the way; I'm the accelerant."

*Reconciled, a virtual bookkeeping and accounting services company headquartered in Burlington, Vermont, is both a Power Partner Award winner and an Inc. 5000 honoree for 2022.*

More than  
**80%**

**OF CEOs SAY THAT SCALING THEIR BUSINESS IS THEIR PRIMARY GOAL.**

Source: 2022 Inc. 5000 CEO Survey

## 4 | **Abeer Raza** Co-founder and CMO **TEKREVOL**

"Strategies and revenue channels can fail from time to time, and campaigns can stop yielding results. As such, we've always tried to grow our revenue streams horizon-

tally as well as vertically, to be ready if and when some of our drivers stop performing; a new revenue driver fills the gap to keep our momentum strong."

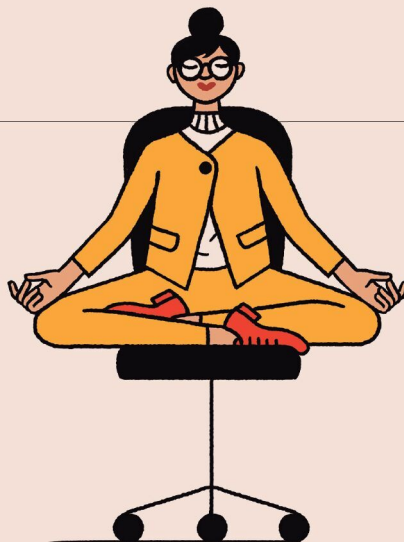
*TekRevol, a Houston-based digital solutions provider that develops custom software and mobile apps, is on the 2022 Inc. 5000.*





4.

Be it a burst pipe or a wiring issue, hiccups abound in any building project. Here are some strategies—from meditation to macromanagement—for overcoming obstacles.



5.

**5 | Charis Jones**  
Founder and CEO  
**SASSY JONES**

“I have a life recipe that works well for my productivity and the growth of my company. It’s simple but not easy. It’s meditation. A healthy mindset and laser focus are among the strongest tools a CEO can have. Meditating every morning for a minimum of 15 minutes allows space, clears the way for sharper decision making, and ultimately increases my overall ‘unfuckwithability.’”

*Sassy Jones, a Richmond, Virginia-based jewelry and accessories brand, landed on the Inc. 5000 list in 2020 and 2021.*

6.

**6 | David Kern**  
President  
**KERN TECHNOLOGY GROUP**

“The defense industry has huge barriers to entry. From managing security clearances to obtaining government approval for your accounting system, there were many ‘frogs’ that needed to be eaten if we wanted to overcome these challenges. We identified these pain points and knocked them out as soon as we could. That allowed us to jump on opportunities when we found them.”

*Defense industry service contractor Kern Technology Group, headquartered in Virginia Beach, Virginia, has made the Inc. 5000 for each of the past three years by “eating frogs,” a term coined by productivity consultant Brian Tracy, based on a quote by Mark Twain, that refers to tackling potential roadblocks swiftly.*

**Inc. 5000**  
COMPANY  
SPOTLIGHT

**N°3076**  
2022 Ranking

**307%**  
3-Year  
Growth

**17**  
Years In  
Business

**\$35.4M**  
2021 Revenue



# Charting a Course to the American Dream

Paramount Business Jets brings ethics aboard its business model.

**A**sk anyone who's lived the American Dream, and they'll tell you it happens through hard work. Richard Zaher, the founder and CEO of Paramount Business Jets, clearly put in the effort and perseverance. However, it was ethics and competence that helped land his company on the 2022 Inc. 5000 list of America's fastest-growing private companies.

In the 1980s, Zaher's family fled war, immigrating to America with just \$35. His mother—known for her “golden voice” throughout Central Asia—continued as a full-time Voice of America broadcaster and worked weekends at a convenience store. At 12, Zaher emulated his mother's work ethic and bought a lawnmower at a yard sale, fixed it, and started a business cutting lawns. Over the years, he worked in dozens of jobs, including dishwasher, grocery store bagger, busboy, costumed character, and door-to-door vacuum cleaner salesman.

## CREATING A CULTURE OF KINDNESS

Through those varied experiences, he says he learned the importance of kindness. But after graduating from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, he worked as a private jet charter broker in a company with a cutthroat culture. At times, fistfights broke out over leads, he says. After he was shorted on a commission, he decided it was time to make a change. He requested \$5,000 from his father to start his own jet brokerage firm.

At first, he struggled to find clients. Then he had a clever idea: He'd plan the most luxurious private jet trip he could think of, traveling to all seven Wonders of the World. At \$375,000 per person, he figured it likely wouldn't sell, but it did get his company featured in private jet magazines. That's when business began to pick up.

By 2013, Paramount Business Jets made the Inc. 5000 list for the first time, landing the 409th spot with an impressive three-year growth of 1,093 percent. Zaher says the company set itself apart with a principled business model at a time when headlines read, “Why Are Private Jet Brokers So Sleazy?”

When the pandemic shut down air traffic in March 2020, Paramount Business Jets initially lost \$1 million. However, the next



Richard Zaher, founder and CEO,  
Paramount Business Jets

month, the company made up revenue by filling in for grounded commercial flights, flying medical personnel and moving Covid test kits. “We were resourceful, cost-effective, and ready to help in any part of the world,” Zaher says.

## GENERATIONAL ROLE MODEL

“What we have done is we have maintained our integrity over the years, and of course we provide a very competent service,” Zaher says. He is also the director of Best You Best Me, which funds charity projects that support acts of kindness. The father of four young children feels it's important to give back. “I have all the reasons in the world to be a role model—to teach my kids how you should be in order to be successful,” Zaher says.

PARAMOUNTBUSINESSJETS.COM

Surround yourself with the right people, and breaking new ground will be easier than you think. Here's how to find—and keep—that talent.

**1 | Cheryl Gentry**  
CEO  
GLOW GLOBAL EVENTS

“Hire for attitude and train for skill. It's much easier to teach new employees the skills they need to do their jobs than it is to change their attitudes. Hire candidates with the right attitude, and then train them in the specifics to excel in their roles. This will save you time and money in the long run.”

*Glow Global Events, a New York City-based event planning company, made the Inc. 5000 list in 2020.*



3.

**2 | Liz Steblay**  
Founder and president  
PROKO AGENCY

“A part-time CFO propelled our business by analyzing profitability metrics and suggesting tweaks to our pricing and business model. A sharp executive assistant will expand your capacity as a founder to get so much done as well.”

*ProKo Agency, a Del Mar, California-based HR firm, was on the Inc. 5000 list in 2021.*

**3 | Chanie Gluck**  
Founder and CEO  
4D GLOBAL

“As a fast-growing company, we don't have time to train leaders on how to lead. Experienced leadership is a must. Find those people, pay them well, and watch them thrive.”

*4D Global, a Scottsdale, Arizona-based medical-billing staffing company, is a 2022 Inc. 5000 honoree.*

Nearly  
**2/3**

**OF FOUNDERS SAY THAT FINDING AND RETAINING TOP TALENT IS THE BIGGEST OBSTACLE TO GROWING THEIR COMPANY.**

Source: 2022 Inc. 5000 CEO Survey

1.



2.

**Inc.5000**  
COMPANY  
SPOTLIGHT

**N°3855**  
2022 Ranking

**5X**  
Inc.5000  
Honoree

**\$100+M**  
Annual Wholesale  
Revenue

**400+**  
Locations  
Nationwide



# Mattress and Home Furnishing Franchise Feels Right at Home with Rapid Growth

Retail Service Systems' BoxDrop® franchise empowers entrepreneurs with a proven business model and no royalty payments.

At Retail Service Systems (RSS), there are no sales goals. Yet the parent company of the mattress and home furnishings franchise brand BoxDrop® is in the rarefied air of making the Inc. 5000 list five years in a row as one of the fastest-growing franchise opportunities nationwide.

In the age of e-commerce, RSS generates 98 percent of its revenue through brick-and-mortar retail locations. In less than a decade, the company has grown from 17 locations to 400 and from less than \$5 million in wholesale revenue to more than \$100 million.

RSS offers its BoxDrop® Mattress and Sofa franchisees a piece of the \$120 billion home furnishings industry by sourcing and manufacturing high-quality, private label products at significant discounts. They offer products that customers can't get anywhere else.

"We're a rodeo in an elevator," says CEO Scott Andrew—disruptors who keep growing upward. In 2018, RSS recognized expansive opportunities in germ remediation, and scaled, then sold, an additional franchise, bioPURE, "before Covid was even a word we all knew."

↓  
Jerry Williams,  
president of Retail  
Service Systems,  
at the company's  
Dublin, Ohio  
headquarters.



## EMPOWERING ENTREPRENEURS

RSS attributes its rapid growth to a simple mission statement displayed on a sign near the front door of its Dublin, Ohio, headquarters: "Empowering Entrepreneurs." They do that by offering a low franchise fee and no royalty fees. Royalties for other franchises typically run 4 to 12 percent of annual revenue, according to the U.S. Small Business Administration.

"We're really in the business of helping people become successful entrepreneurs," Andrew says. Instead of regional managers, who focus on sales numbers, they offer customized training from division coaches, who maintain successful BoxDrop locations of their own.

"Our franchise model is designed to lower the initial capital requirements and the overall risk of business ownership," says David Wilson, chief marketing officer. RSS offers a "success-aggressive, risk-averse" franchise model that includes proprietary digital and social media marketing methods, sales methods, and business operation practices.

"Because we've successfully defended it in state and federal court as providing the user with a competitive advantage in the marketplace, we can claim publicly that it's a trade secret," Andrew says.

The business attracts a wide range of franchisees, including corporate executives, recent college graduates, former athletes, veterans, pastors, salespeople, and blue-collar workers. What's more, the referral ratio for new locations is 74 percent, which Andrew says is three times the industry average for enterprise level franchises with more than 250 locations.

## INTERNET INSENSITIVE AND RECESSION RESISTANT

How does a brick-and-mortar location make it in the digital-first 2020s? Andrew and Wilson cite three major factors. First is the size of the market and the company's role in it. The continued growth of the number of American households and RSS's relative "sliver" of the business leaves room for growth.

Second is the industry's "internet insensitivity." When it comes to choosing home furnishings, brick-and-mortar locations have an advantage.

"You want to lie on the bed, right?" Wilson asks, citing high return rates on mattresses ordered online. "These brands are scrambling to get into retail, because customers want to touch it, feel it, envision it in their home." BoxDrop's nationwide customer review ratings average 4.9 stars out of five on Google and Facebook.

Third, they say their business model is recession-resistant because they can offer discounts for high quality merchandise in an industry that's expected to grow as people continue to invest in their living spaces, post-pandemic.

## A SUCCESSFUL PIVOT

While other franchises with physical locations suffered from shutdowns and reduced traffic during the Covid outbreak in 2020, RSS's sales grew significantly. As big-box furniture stores began closing nationwide, RSS read every state and federal pandemic-related business regulation to find ways for BoxDrop franchisees to stay open. As a result, their 2020 sales were up 52 percent over the year before.

"We literally pivoted our model to take advantage of the chaos that was going on in the marketplace," says Andrew, adding that BoxDrop closed just 30 locations and only briefly.

## FRANCHISE OF THE TIMES

Though there are other franchises that are committed to their franchisees' success, BoxDrop provides an affordable, flexible, and risk-averse business model for exclusive brands in a protected territory.

"Statistics show you have an easier time getting into Harvard than you have becoming an owner of a Chick-fil-A," Andrew says, who expects BoxDrop to grow to 2,000 locations nationwide by 2028. The company is also adding a hybrid e-commerce program.

"At BoxDrop, if you have a good work ethic, and you come in, follow the system, and follow the coach, you'll be successful," Wilson adds.

RETAILSERVICESYSTEMS.COM

↓  
Inside the BoxDrop  
Mattress & Furniture  
Clearance Center  
in Castle Rock,  
Colorado.



# TAKE IT FROM THEM

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 91



When in doubt, look to advice from the building pros who've been there, done that.

## 1 | **Anthony Coombs** Founder **SPLENDIES**

"In the early days of my company, we ran into an unenviable problem: We didn't have enough inventory to fulfill orders. I went out on a walk and came up with a novel solution: a waitlist. Because we were up front with the situation, fewer than 1 percent of consumers on the waitlist canceled their orders. We eventually fulfilled every one. The takeaway? The waitlist created a sense of FOMO among people, and get-

ting off the waitlist was almost as exciting to them as getting their package."

*Coombs's Santa Monica, California-based underwear subscription company landed on the Inc. 5000 in 2021.*

## 2 | **Mackey McNeill** Founder **MACKEY**

"Managing, communicating, and acknowledging the stress of change isn't for the faint of heart. While I thrive on change, most people do not. Letting the team know why we must switch gears makes it easier, as does listening to their frus-

trations, even when you can't take them away. For me personally, breathing and meditation help. So does staying grounded in our why and in my belief that the universe is always conspiring for my highest good, even when what is coming at me is something I would have never chosen."

*McNeill's Bellevue, Kentucky-based financial growth coaching and CFO advising firm is on the 2022 Inc. 5000.*

## 3 | **Norm Brodsky** Entrepreneur-in-residence **BIRTHING OF GIANTS**

"When my first Inc. 5000 company, Perfect Courier, was growing fast—covering 17 states and booking more than \$100 million in sales in just six years—it was easy to think that everything I touched

would turn to gold. That all changed when that company crashed along with the stock market in 1987. One habit I picked up from that catastrophic business failure is this: Whenever I sit down at a meeting with my trusty yellow legal pad, I write 'stupid, stupid, stupid' on the first page, because I know there are other—sometimes better—ideas in the room."

*Brodsky has founded three Inc. 5000 companies and today serves as entrepreneur-in-residence at Birthing of Giants, a fellowship program for owners of fast-growing businesses.*

## 4 | **Paul Goldman** Founder and CEO **MUSERK**

"Even when we were just a couple of people, we always thought of ourselves as a large team and tried to mimic larger company processes. It helped by training us as we grew—kind of like a vision-boarding strategy."

*Muserk, a Nashville-based global rights management company for music and video content, is a two-time Inc. 5000 honoree, for 2021 and 2022.*





**Inc. 5000**  
COMPANY  
SPOTLIGHT

**N°2204**  
2022 Ranking

**3X**  
Inc. 5000  
Honoree

**\$250M**  
Medical Care  
Provided, 2022

**\$800M**  
Medical Liens  
Serviced

**gain**  
servicing

# The Company Leveling the Insurance Playing Field

Gain's artificial intelligence-powered platform makes it simple for health care providers to diversify payment methods for uninsured and underinsured patients.

**T**hirty million U.S. residents lack health insurance, according to a 2021 National Health Interview Survey. Yet less than half of Americans have enough savings in their bank account to cover an unexpected \$1,000 expense, a 2022 Bankrate survey found. So, what happens when someone is injured in an accident, such as a car crash?

Reid Zeising, CEO and founder of Gain (formally Cherokee Legal Holdings), a medical lien servicing and legal funding company, believes anyone injured through no fault of their own deserves quality medical care, regardless of their financial or insurance status. He started Gain in 2011 to provide financial options to personal injury victims while they awaited their settlements. In 2016, he expanded his mission with a subsidiary—Gain Servicing—that uses an innovative artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled platform to provide Letter of Protection (LOP) servicing and collections to doctors. LOPs are legally binding contracts stating that health care costs will be paid after a successful settlement or judgement.

Gain's services make it simpler for doctors to accept LOPs as payment so they can focus on providing quality medical care to those in need. In 2022, Gain Servicing accounted for 65 percent of Gain's total revenue. This year, it will rise to 85 percent.



Reid Zeising, founder  
and CEO, Gain

## A GREAT HUMBLING

"We exist to even the playing field with insurance companies," Zeising says. But he hasn't always taken a mission-first approach to business. When he worked in investment banking and hedge fund management, money and ego were his drivers. This changed in 2007 when he completed a two-year, semi-hostile takeover of a public company—then watched as the market downturn pummeled the business. "I was deeply humbled and reemerged to find a higher purpose helping others rather than myself," he says.

## PEOPLE + TECH

Gain's 100-plus employees share Zeising's commitment to caring for the "millions of Americans who have been taken advantage of by the insurance industry." Proprietary technology also fuels success. Historically, doctors have had lower collections and higher write-offs when attempting to self-serve these complex claims. Gain's LOP servicing platform streamlines the process, while its managed services team handles the communications, operating, legislative, judicial, and insurance defense challenges that make these collections complicated. Practitioners can then focus on patients—including the underinsured and uninsured—confident they will be compensated. "We collect, on average, almost 900 basis points more than providers do if self-servicing these accounts," Zeising says.

Gain creates value for legal teams, too, by streamlining processes and mitigating risk. "Most businesses have some form of zero-sum gain, some form of taking from one group to give to another. Not us. I've never seen a business so supportive of the collective good of all its stakeholders." Honored with three Inc. 5000 designations, 15,000 law firm partners, and 3,000 health care clients, Gain is well-positioned for continued growth. But more important to Zeising is the company's long-term goal: juxtaposing the third-party liability industry and creating a fairer insurance system for all.

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# Salad Days

**When Georgetown student Jonathan Neman couldn't find a healthy lunch option near campus, he decided to create one himself. In 2007, Neman and two classmates founded fast-casual salad chain Sweetgreen. Their ambition soon scaled. Over the next 14 years, they opened more than 120 locations, aspiring to become the McDonald's of their generation, but with healthy food. In 2021, when Sweetgreen went public, the by-then L.A.-based company raised \$364 million in its IPO. But the founders soon discovered that being publicly traded comes with entirely new challenges.**

—As told to Kevin J. Ryan

**Q** The IPO process brought me back to the early days of founding a startup, when you're writing your business plan and telling your story. It forced us to really sharpen our strategy and ask: What are our competitive advantages? We're focusing on what people love about us—delicious, locally sourced ingredients—while investing in technology like automated kitchens that can lower our prices and bring affordable, healthy food to more communities. That's always been our long-term goal.

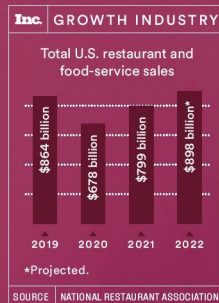
The day of the IPO was an amazing moment of reflection. Here was this thing

that we started in our dorm, and now we were ringing the bell at the New York Stock Exchange. In that moment, you know there's a long way to go, but it's important to celebrate small wins. We toasted with champagne that night, and then it was back to work the next morning.

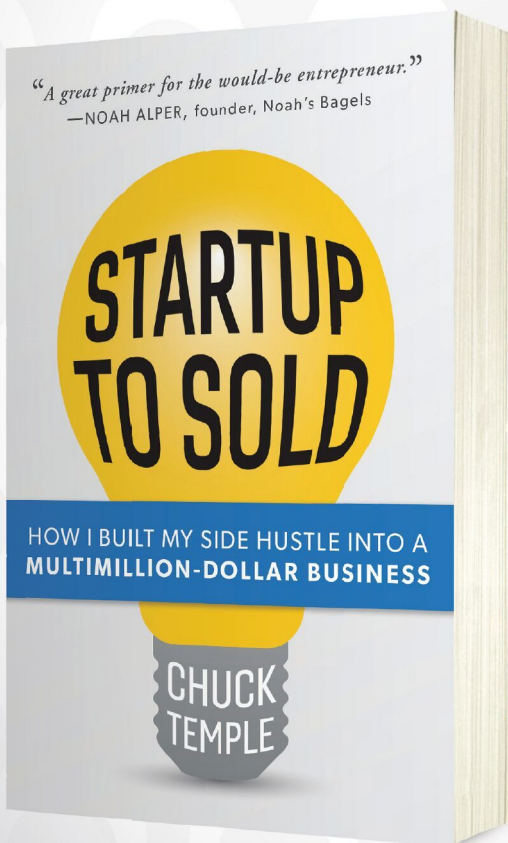
Securing that capital has really helped us expand our footprint. We'll open about

45 new restaurants this year, bringing our total to more than 200. Last year, we opened our first drive-through and our first digital-only pickup store, both of which will give us a competitive advantage. That said, the first year as a public company was definitely challenging. The markets have been volatile, and seeing your stock price fall isn't for the faint of heart.

We told our company that the number would go up and down. We can't focus on it. As a CEO, it tests your wits and your commitment. Are you in this just for the money, or do you really believe in what you're doing? It's helped reaffirm that, for me, it's the latter. I've come through this energized and as committed as I've ever been. These days, I'm playing the long game. ●●



# GROW AN INDUSTRY-LEADING COMPANY—*WITHOUT DEBT*



In *Startup to Sold*, Chuck Temple leads readers through his journey of going from a broke college graduate with no business education or experience to the successful owner of an industry-leading, multimillion-dollar company. With an approachable humor and honesty, Temple shares his path to creating, growing, and finally selling his startup company.

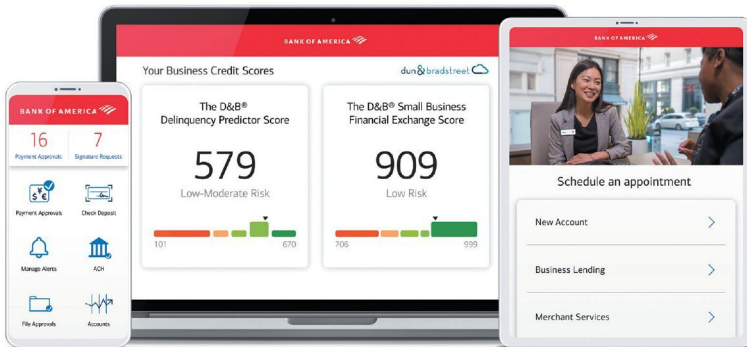
For first-time entrepreneurs and aspiring business owners, *Startup to Sold* is an accessible, valuable tool that highlights the realities of what it takes to achieve entrepreneurial success. Filled with useful tips, lessons learned, game-changing resources, and engaging anecdotes from Temple's journey to help you navigate your own.



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