Inc. 5000

2023

Building the Future Together

Conference & Gala
October 31 – November 2, 2023

Capital One Business

50

Companies building the future together

From the September 2023 Issue.

If today is any indication, tomorrow is looking pretty amazing. That may sound a bit starry-eyed to some, but we here at Inc. have a unique perspective. You see, we're steeped in the stories of the founders who've built the fastest-growing private companies in our nation. They are by turns astonishing, harrowing, fascinating, and—most of all—inspiring. • Consider FarmboxRx (p. 16), the company founded by a formerly single mother on food stamps that delivers produce as medicine under health care plans. Or Pyx Health, an intervention platform built to tackle the loneliness epidemic by a couple who lost their daughter to it. Or CareBridge (p. 6), this year's No. 1 company, which grew, like gangbusters, out of the collaboration between serial entrepreneur Brad Smith and former Tennessee senator Bill Frist. CareBridge is on a mission to convert Medicaid to value-based care, but it's no nonprofit: It grew revenue 157,000 percent over the past three years to a staggering $872.6 million in 2022. These examples come from just one slice of the economy, and just a few of the pages that follow. Overall, median revenue growth for the top 500 companies in 2022 ticked up to 2,238 percent from 2,144 percent the previous year. In all, Inc. 5000 companies added 1,187,266 jobs to the economy over the past three years. • Those metrics add up to a lot of very determined entrepreneurs looking for solutions to the biggest problems facing us today. As we said, amazing.

Celebrating Success.

On behalf of everyone at Capital One Business, thank you for choosing to be here. When running a business, there is rarely enough time in the day to tackle everything – including celebrating successes both big and small. That's what makes the Inc. 5000 Conference so special: it's a rare moment for you to take a step back, reflect and revel in those accomplishments. We are honored to celebrate five years as the official partner of the Inc. 5000 and are thrilled to be sharing these transformative days with you.

While you may know us as a financial services company, we are driven by a dedication to the human journey of entrepreneurship and serving business owners at every stage, every challenge, and every triumph. Our partnership with Inc. was built upon these shared values and a mission to empower and elevate the fast-growing companies that fuel the engine of our economy.

We see this week as the pinnacle of our partnership – an opportunity to continue our engagement with this awe-inspiring community, and to meet, interact with and learn from you. While you're here in San Antonio, we hope you'll take a few moments to spend more time with us. Whether it's dropping by the Capital One Business experience in the Marketplace, attending one of our sessions, partaking in our Inc. 5000 Conference Party on Wednesday or joining us for the Gala on Thursday evening, we welcome the opportunity to connect with you.

Congratulations on this incredible recognition.

David Rabkin
Head of Business Cards & Payments
Capital One

Well Done.

Your drive and determination have secured your spot on the 2023 Inc. 5000 list. Congratulations on earning this prestigious recognition.

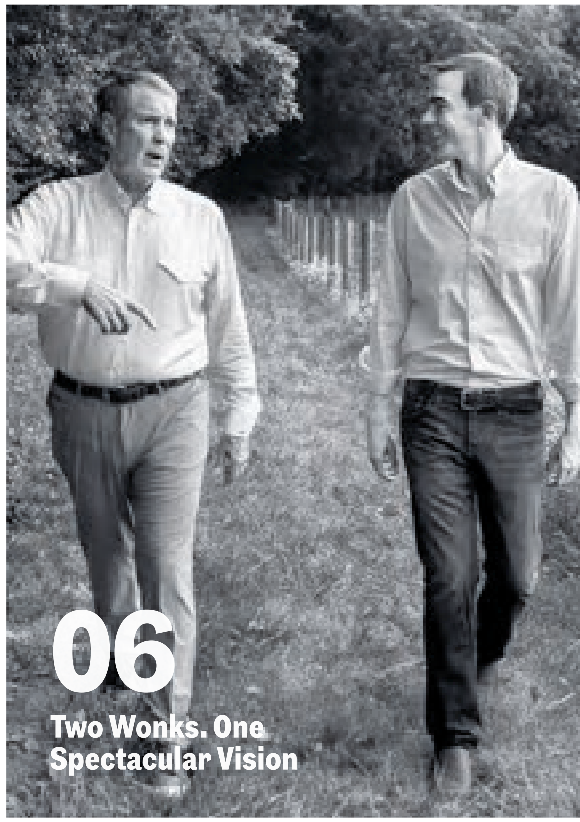
As a presenting sponsor, Insperity is excited to welcome you to the 2023 Inc. 5000 Conference. We're glad you're here and commend you for rising above adversity to achieve remarkable growth.

In your welcome bag, you'll find an Insperity collectible sticker pack. Visit the Insperity booth in the marketplace to receive your free water bottle and personalize it with these unique messages.

We can't wait to congratulate you in person and help you discover how our optimal blend of HR services and technology can support your company's continued success.

Celebrating with you,

Paul J. Sarvadi
Chairman and CEO, Insperity



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Two Wonks. One Spectacular Vision

How did Brad Smith and Bill Frist create CareBridge, the fastest-growing company in America? By aiming to solve not one problem, but two: how to rein in health care costs, and how to deliver better care. *—Bill Saporito*

Abridged from the September 2023 Issue.

Bill Frist was already three or four careers deep—surgeon, senator, venture capitalist, environmentalist—when Brad Smith showed up at his doorstep in 2008 in Princeton, New Jersey, where Frist was teaching. Smith was then a 26-year-old whose first job out of Harvard was chauffeur. Not for a limo service, but for Bob Corker, who was running for Frist's former job, U.S. senator from Tennessee. For two years, Smith drove Corker around the state, absorbing politics at the ground level. Following his election, Corker thought Frist might be a good person for Smith to know, particularly since both were interested in education policy, which Smith had studied in grad school. "I went to see him, even slept on his couch, which saved me the hotel room," says Smith, who got a gig researching a book out of the meeting. But the meeting's big payoff, 15 years later, would be a place at the helm of the fastest-growing private company in America. In 2019, the two men co-founded CareBridge, a value-based health care management company whose revenue expanded a feverish 157,144 percent last year, to nearly $873 million, putting it atop the 2023 Inc. 5000. With revenue likely to surpass $2.5 billion this year, CareBridge may have a chance to defend its title. That's because some of the country's largest health insurance companies are hiring CareBridge to care for Medicaid patients who receive home and community-based services.

It's a growing business. These clients often have physical, intellectual, or developmental challenges, and require a lot of resources. In the past, many would have been institutionalized. In recent decades, the emphasis has been on helping them stay within their community, either at home with a family caregiver or in group homes with a paid caregiver. But the change hasn't necessarily improved their lives or contained costs. Medicaid spent $162 billion in 2020 on home and community-based services, up from $95 billion in 2016, reflecting the shift from institutional care, but also the growth in cost per patient. With the aging of America, demand will increase, and the federal government lacks the expertise for a fine-grained response.

"The government is too big to solve this problem. It can't individualize enough," says Frist, a Republican who certainly tried to solve it in his two Senate terms: In 2003, he shepherded through a Medicare overhaul that added drug coverage—and substantially expanded the role of private health plans, to improve efficiency. He adds, as it happens, that the big insurers aren't able to manage the details either, and need help.

The promise of CareBridge is to promote well-being in part by using technology—a two-way tablet in the hands of each caregiver or patient that monitors health signals and connects the patient with appropriate services, 24 hours a day. The goal is fewer hospitalizations or trips to the emergency department, and healthier, happier clients. That, in turn, means lower health care costs. CareBridge pockets some of that savings as income.

Smith, 40, and Frist, 71, are an unusual combination: exquisitely educated men

NO. 1

CAREBRIDGE EXECUTIVE CHAIRMAN: BRAD SMITH

CATEGORY: HEALTH SERVICES

THREE-YEAR REVENUE GROWTH: 157,144%

Smith and Frist are both longtime health care mavens, but believe their entrepreneurial flair is their key to success.

"The kind of things that health care does for people don't exist in other sectors. You can build businesses that have huge impact."

—Brad Smith, co-founder, CareBridge

(Harvard-Oxford for the former; Princeton-Harvard Med for the latter) who have a passion for serving vulnerable populations. "Health care is unique in where it sits in the U.S. economy," says Smith. "The kind of things that health care does for people don't exist in other sectors. You can build businesses that have huge impact." More important, they've backed their passion with a business model that—within a hopelessly inefficient yet complex industry—they say reduces costs and produces both better outcomes for patients and profits for investors.

They are also convinced that they can do more good as entrepreneurs than they would as bureaucrats or politicians. If you're a cynic, you can label them as insiders who have taken advantage of the revolving door that connects powerful people in government with highly regulated industries. (Why, for instance, was the Federal Aviation Administration recently run by a former airline executive when airline service is so awful?) And state Medicaid agencies have drawn criticism for awarding contracts to companies whose executives once worked for those agencies.

But health care produces data—measurable outcomes. And the initial data on CareBridge's performance was so compelling that the owners of four of the largest managed Medicaid plans—Elevance Health (formerly Anthem), UnitedHealthcare, Centene, and Aetna CVS—took a piece of CareBridge's $140 million Series B funding round last year, helping push CareBridge's valuation past $2 billion. These payers, as the big health insurers are known, are also CareBridge's biggest customers, and they are moving the company into 30 states where they have won Medicaid contracts.

For Frist, being an entrepreneur is an extension of what he did as a physician, but on a broader canvas, which is what makes it attractive to him. "I took an oath as a surgeon to take one person at a time and fix their heart, fix their lungs," he says. "What I have been lucky with, and blessed with, is the opportunity to see how to take things to scale." In Smith, Frist sees someone who shares his mission and can also execute. He describes Smith as a data nerd with a deeply analytical mind, able to convert numbers into insights and insights into action—and also as an entrepreneur who can attract talent. "Those are the things that make him special at getting to scale fast," says Frist. "He builds great teams."

PHOTOGRAPH BY GABRIEL MCCURDY

CELEBRATE YOUR

STORY.

We invite you to join Indiana's bold entrepreneurial ecosystem and be a part of this thriving community of innovators. Discover how Indiana can fuel your journey.

INDIANA FOR THE BOLD

Inc.5000 COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

Nº4727	Nº59	84%	46
2023 Ranking	Insurance Ranking	3-Year Growth	Employees

OCMI WORKERS COMP

This Founder Made His Way From Brooklyn to the Inc. 5000

OCMI Workers Comp is one of two Inc. 5000 businesses this entrepreneur is running, with steadfast hustle and a clear sense of purpose.

Oscar Montenegro, founder of OCMI Workers Comp—a workers' compensation insurance provider that specializes in the construction industry—is not afraid of the grind. He owns 22 companies, two of which rank on the Inc. 5000 list of America's fastest-growing private companies. "I came here from Guatemala when I was three years old. As a family of seven, we lived in a one-bedroom apartment in Flatbush, Brooklyn," he explains. "But my family always worked hard."

Through OCMI, Montenegro supports entrepreneurs who are overlooked by insurance brokerages because their companies are too small or considered risky. OCMI ensures these businesses have the affordable coverage they need, using proprietary technology solutions and a hands-on approach to demystify the insurance space. Montenegro also runs P.E.O.PayGo, a technology professional employer organization (PEO) that offers human resources and online payroll solutions that are used by many OCMI's clients.

BUILT WITH A WALL STREET MENTALITY

Montenegro learned to hustle at 11-years-old, selling trading cards. A career on Wall Street took his work ethic to the next level. He got his first Wall Street job when he was 17. "They needed someone who was bilingual, a hustler, and liked to talk and sell," he says. The role was 100-percent commission based. He would make 400 to 700 calls a day, then head to his restaurant job in the evenings. Within a year, he made enough in commissions to quit waitering.

In 2006, after years on Wall Street, he was approached by a PEO in South Florida that was hiring stockbrokers. "I used to drive more than 55,000 miles a year, just going to Home Depots and soliciting contractors, saying, 'hey, if you need worker's comp, let me know,'" he explains. In 2008, he started his own firm and taught himself internet marketing to grow his pipeline faster than he could pounding the pavement.

→ Oscar Montenegro, CEO, OCMI Workers Comp

KNOW YOUR CUSTOMERS

Montenegro says a simple concept helped him find success quickly: KYC, which stands for "know your customers." Although OCMI provides workers' compensation for other industries, the construction sector is its bread and butter. It's an industry Montenegro understands well, as he used to work for his uncle's construction company. He knows clients are not always tech-savvy, so he has invested in building easy-to-use technology solutions, including a digital onboarding process, a payroll app, and a customer relationship management (CRM) platform called Janus.

By focusing on accessible technology and personalized customer service, Montenegro plans continued growth for OCMI and its sister company, PEOPayGo. Money is not the motivator, though. Montenegro wants to provide for its employees and make a difference to all its customers, some of whom are immigrants with a hustle mentality he recognizes. "Every client deserves the right to acquire workers' comp coverage, and our in-house programs can do that." he says. "That feels really good."

OCMIWORKERSCOMP.COM

Inc.5000 COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

N°321 2023 Ranking

1760% 3-Year Growth

15 Employees

HQ Eastvale, Calif.

The Legal Marketing Agency That's Shaking Up a Sleepy Industry

NETFLY, a top Inc. 5000 legal marketing agency, is building a legacy with a no-nonsense approach to driving rapid growth for clients.

NETFLY is a digital marketing agency for law firms that want to grow fast. Its Law Firm Acceleration™ program helps firms add $1 to $12 million in revenue within one year. Clients range from small firms to some of the biggest in the nation. Just as important, though, says Founder and CEO Austin Irabor, are the firms NETFLY doesn't work with. These include solo attorneys, because they won't have bandwidth for the demand NETFLY will generate, and law firm owners who aren't ready to make operational improvements.

"We don't look at marketing the way a typical law firm marketing person or typical lawyer does. We look at it through the lens of designing experiences," Irabor explains. As such, NETFLY does more than advertising—it strategizes firms' communications to deliver delightful experiences during every customer interaction. Granted, "delight" isn't a word typically used in the same sentence as "law firm." That's what makes NETFLY's approach transformational. "When you do things the NETFLY way, it becomes much easier to win clients, get five-star reviews, gain referrals, and start to scale revenue more quickly. Hence the name, Law Firm Acceleration," he explains.

→ Austin Irabor, founder and CEO, NETFLY

A "DRAG RACE" MENTALITY TO GROWTH

The "NETFLY way" includes an amalgamation of best practices Irabor learned from other industries after he changed his mind about becoming a lawyer when he was a pre-law major in college. He worked in politics as a digital marketing consultant, then in Silicon Beach, running marketing programs for startups that treated growth "like a drag race." He was struck by the difference between young companies and legacy organizations. "These established businesses lost their aggression centuries ago. That is what makes them ripe for disruption. I came up with the hypothesis that if I applied the targeted marketing I learned in politics combined with the drag race qualities of the startup world, I could accelerate law firms," he explains.

His hypothesis proved true. NETFLY has helped dozens of clients reap 5 to 60 times their monthly return on investment, depending on their practice area. Some have since opened additional locations or purchased other law firms to drive continued growth.

AIMING FOR CATEGORY DOMINATION

NETFLY applies "drag race" principles to its own business, too. Since its start in 2018, it has grown from low-to-mid six figures to a multimillion-dollar business. This year, at No. 321, NETFLY is a top-ranked legal marketing firm on the Inc. 5000. By growing the business, Irabor hopes to leave a legacy. "In the end, I expect to be famous," he explains. "Not Kim Kardashian-famous, but maybe Ray Dalio-famous. I want to matter in the space I'm in. I don't want to do anything half-way. I want to take this all the way to the top and be the best."

NETFLYDIGITAL.COM

Inc.5000 COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

N°3021	172%	$55M	180
2023 Ranking	3-Year Growth	2022 Revenue	Employees

Building a One-Stop Shop for Electronics

PTEC Solutions provides turn-key integration products and engineering services for semiconductor, networking, and technology company needs.

Ever since Peter Pham became an engineer in Silicon Valley, he dreamed of creating his own electronics company. His vision became reality in 2010 when he established PTEC Solutions. The path to entrepreneurship wasn't easy, but Pham's humble background growing up in Vietnam trained him to be self-reliant and to persevere. From interacting with customers to procuring office supplies to handling facility maintenance, he did it all. Today, his company has 180 employees and is an Inc. 5000 honoree for the third time.

PTEC specializes in supporting complex manufacturing processes, such as harness manufacturing, precision machining, electro- and opto-mechanical box build, and fiber optics assembly customization. Its California site has an ISO Class 6 cleanroom, which allows it to manufacture optics and electronics products in a particle-controlled environment. From this site and two other locations, PTEC serves customers worldwide.

Peter Pham, CEO,
PTEC Solutions Inc.

ONE-STOP SHOP

The company's Fremont, California, headquarters is conducive to close collaboration with customers like Google, Apple, Applied Materials, and Cisco, which require specialized equipment and conditions to engage in research and development. PTEC offers these services as a one-stop shop—the company can buy or make all needed parts and integrate them into custom products. It can fabricate machined parts in its machine shop and manufacture fiber optic assemblies, cables, and harnesses on its manufacturing floor. This allows PTEC to provide turn-key custom products, integrated electro-mechanical and optical enclosures, and be a true system integrator. "Not many companies offer diverse specialties like ours in one house," Pham says.

One key to PTEC's success is reputation, and PTEC has built a reputation for uncompromising quality and fast turnaround time, he says. "While pricing plays an important role in business negotiations, customers are willing to pay higher prices for quality products that are delivered on time."

PTEC also has a rebate program, which has attracted customers who are drawn to working with the company as a strategic partner for pricing and quality. "We can, in turn, grow our business volume with these strategic clients," Pham says.

DIVERSIFICATION AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

In its latest development, PTEC has extended its capabilities to provide engineering services in the staffing arena. Leveraging Pham's long-established relationships with tech workers, PTEC now helps Bay Area companies hunt for engineering expertise and resources, which diversifies its services and offerings.

PTEC's employees share a common goal to exceed customer satisfaction. "Trust the people who work for you, and let them do their work," Pham says. At PTEC, the employees are not necessarily confined to one role, but can explore their interests and potential to take on new responsibilities and grow with the company.

Part of PTEC's growth strategy is to be judicious about what new business opportunities they accept. Pham says, "When labor is tight, you need to make the right choice." Pham's staff sometimes works long hours to meet client deadlines and goals and wants to harness their power to provide the best results.

PTECSOLUTIONS.COM

Inc.5000 COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

N°8	30,716%	37	HQ	marketcall
2023 Ranking	3-Year Growth	Employees	Pasadena, Calif.	

Disrupting the Performance Marketing Landscape

Performance-driven marketing tools and an AI-implemented self-service platform differentiates digital marketing agency Marketcall.

↑ Marketcall team in their Pasadena, California office

More than a century ago, retailer John Wanamaker famously said, "Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted; the trouble is, I don't know which half." Today, digital marketing agency Marketcall could tell Wanamaker down to the penny where to best invest his marketing money, through its proprietary performance marketing platform.

Digital marketing involves promoting products and services online and is currently estimated to be a $322 billion industry. Under the umbrella of digital marketing, the performance marketing niche is the fastest growing, Marketcall CEO and Managing Partner Alexey Shmonov says, explaining that it currently accounts for an estimated 25 percent share of the larger market and is worth around $65 billion.

SPOTTING A MARKET OPPORTUNITY

Shmonov and vice president of business development and managing partner Fedor Zotov, both natives of Russia, relocated to the U.S. in 2017 to apply their well-honed business and marketing skills to a new market. The duo founded Marketcall as an affiliate network the following year when they recognized the opportunity to connect online marketers (affiliates) with brands (advertisers) to streamline lead-generation services.

The firm had been targeting clients in various industries when it had success with a pay-per-call service targeting travel companies. In the travel industry, customers frequently prefer to use the phone to make hotel and airline reservations. That market was underserved, and Marketcall's service was in high demand with travel agencies.

The company quickly evolved to specialize in performance marketing and lead generation, where its distinctive focus on cost-per-action (CPA) set it apart. Those actions include pay-per-call, pay-per-lead, or pay-per-sale, with advertisers only paying for results achieved.

Although the firm built a solid base in the travel industry, Marketcall's revenue plummeted by 90 percent when Covid hit. "No one was traveling," Zotov confirms—nor were travel companies scaling their services. The company had to pivot to new markets to survive. Consumers were buying insurance and health care services. Marketcall shifted gears to focus on those markets, and revenue rose dramatically. Today, the company serves markets ranging from health insurance and Medicare to financial services, legal, travel, home services, and e-commerce.

PAY FOR PERFORMANCE

To illustrate the difference between traditional and performance marketing, Shmonov gives the example of spending $100,000 per month on traditional media like television, radio, and billboards. Although the media company can report on the size of its viewing audience, the advertiser will actually have no way of knowing how many people expressed interest and then purchased the product as a result of the ad campaign.

In comparison, Marketcall can generate hundreds of calls from interested sales prospects for the same amount, he says. Based on the campaign, those calls or leads will then convert at a specific rate, which can be linked back to the firm's efforts. Performance marketing is more of a math equation than guesswork.

Marketcall and its affiliates utilize all digital channels but primarily focus on Facebook, Google, YouTube, and TikTok. Those channels provide a high volume of high-quality leads for its clients.

The true advantage of Marketcall's platform lies in its ability to analyze data, predict consumer behavior, and optimize marketing efforts in real-time. "This allows businesses to not only reach their target audience but to do so with precision, empowering companies to make data-driven decisions," says Shmonov.

In 2022, Marketcall pioneered the implementation of artificial intelligence (AI) features within its system. AI transcribes, summarizes, and analyzes incoming calls, making it 20 to 50 times more efficient and cost-effective than the traditional process of listening to every call. Marketcall's platform's tools help its users track and analyze all digital marketing campaigns to optimize results.

LEVERAGING ITS TEAM'S EXPERTISE

Although Marketcall's cutting-edge use of technology sets it apart, that wouldn't be possible without its exceptional team of professionals.

Each professional on the Marketcall team has been carefully selected for their skills and experience, and Shmonov and Zotov have worked hard to cultivate a family-style corporate culture. "Acceptance, open-mindedness, and self-motivation are at the heart of what makes our culture special," Shmonov says.

"The unique blend of marketing professionals and skilled software developers forms the backbone of Marketcall's success," Zotov confirms.

MARKETCALL.COM

↓
Alexey Shmonov (left) and Fedor Zotov, founders, Marketcall

Inc.5000 **COMPANY SPOTLIGHT**

Nº2193	254%	2017	450+	function compliance services
2023 Ranking	3-Year Growth	Year Founded	Customers Serviced	

How One Company Stays Committed to Customer Success

In an industry focused on selling hardware, Function Compliance Services helps customers build holistic systems that work.

Automated monitoring is a vital tool in modern health care that alerts medical staff to environmental changes that can affect both patient care and the bottom line. In hospital organizations, refrigerators or freezers with automated sensors alert staff when temperatures are out of the recommended range.

Addressing alerts or notifications and ensuring compliance might seem simple, but the reality is far more complicated. Health care organizations face challenges like high attrition and thousands of monitoring points across diverse geographic locations and facilities, each with distinct management approaches.

"Buying the hardware is the easy part. The true complexity lies in executing enterprise-level implementation," says Brian Hughes, managing partner of Function Compliance Services.

SCALING, SUSTAINING, MAINTAINING

The stakes can be high when such systems go awry. For example, a single facility's refrigerators may hold tens of thousands of dollars' worth of medications, blood, or tissue samples which can be irreplaceable. While a monitoring program could be perfectly functional initially, within five years, there's an estimated three in five chance the person programmed to receive the alert is no longer in that role—or even with the organization.

Where other companies focus on hardware solutions, Function Compliance Services helps organizations build systems for long-term success. FCS is an automated environmental monitoring-focused company specializing in sales, integration, and field services in the health care space. The company helps clients meet regulatory requirements while creating tailored monitoring solutions that are scalable, sustainable, and maintainable. Solution architects work with hospital stakeholders to design technical and operational aspects of monitoring systems that fit within an organization's culture. Design services ensure that each implementation minimizes the disruption change can cause for front-line health care staff.

FCS is meticulous in its standards and risk management practices. Field engineers deliver onsite temperature and humidity calibrations, ensuring the facility, products, and patients are shielded from avoidable risks. The company also holds the distinction of being an ISO 17025 accredited laboratory through the American Association for Laboratory Accreditation and is recognized by the International Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation.

→ Carl Bjork (left), Brian Hughes (middle), and Spencer Sandstrom (right)

COACHING CUSTOMERS TO SUCCESS

FCS hires and trains field staff to work through various challenges and get the job done. The field team is trained to treat each job like a mission and does not leave until the customer is completely satisfied.

The FCS sales team works with clients to get to the root of problems. If health care administrators believe their system isn't working, the team troubleshoots, diagnoses, and fixes it.

The secret to the FCS's success is "the team's ability to continually and consistently exceed customer expectations," Hughes says. "That is 100 percent a credit to our team and the work they are doing in the field, daily."

FUNCTIONCOMPLIANCESERVICES.COM

How I Went From Food Stamps to Founding a $35 Million Company

Delivering produce as a Medicare benefit, Ashley Tyrner's company hit No. 100 in 2023. *—As told to Jennifer Conrad*

Abridged from the September 2023 Issue.

FarmboxRx founder Ashley Tyrner, 39, sees healthy food as a form of health care. In 2014, she launched Farmbox Direct, which shipped boxes of fresh food anywhere in the U.S. In 2019, she pivoted to focus on the health care market, partnering with Medicare Advantage and private health insurance plans to offer produce boxes as a benefit to members, a business that had attracted an estimated $200 million in public funding through the end of 2022. The Boston-based company rebranded as FarmboxRx, had nearly $35 million in revenue last year, and hit the Inc. 5000 list in 2023 at No. 100, but Tyrner still recalls what her life was like in 2010, when she was newly single, pregnant, and living with her parents in Casa Grande, Arizona.

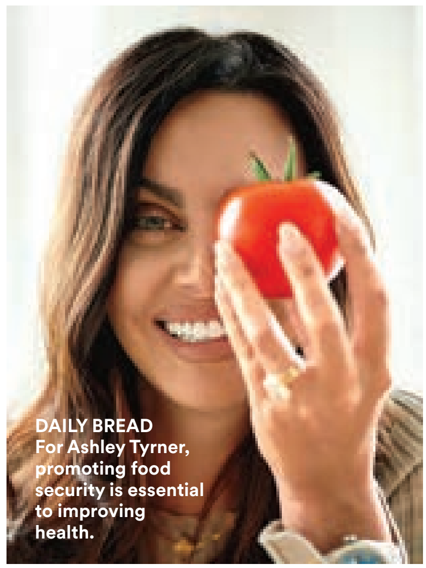
"Thirteen years ago, I was on food stamps, and living in a rural food desert. We would drive 20 to 30 minutes to a grocery store. I'm also Hispanic. The issue is so much more prevalent in Brown and Black communities. Twenty-four million Americans live in food deserts, and half are low-income. That's where the idea for Farmbox Direct began. I knew how hard it was to live on benefits while pregnant and trying to eat healthy.

I moved to New York in 2011 when my daughter was about 2 months old. I worked in branding for a fashion designer for two and a half years, but I wanted to leave very soon in, to be home more with my daughter. And I always knew I wanted to do something to eradicate food insecurity. The wildest thing for me was that even in New York there are food deserts.

I researched the food market for a year. I moved into a studio apartment and saved up a year's rent before I left my corporate job because I knew it would be a while until I could take a salary. I founded Farmbox Direct in 2014 as a direct-to-consumer business shipping produce around the country. Over the next five years, revenue grew to about $1 million.

In 2019, I heard that the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services was going to allow produce to be offered to Medicare Advantage and Medicaid beneficiaries. The government finally caught on that if we can fix someone's diet, we can lower costs on those who have chronic conditions like diabetes and hypertension. So I went out to find a health plan that would work with me.

Nobody would talk to me except an amazing woman named Sonya Maddox, the head of product for Vibra Health. She said, 'I remember what it's like to be like



DAILY BREAD For Ashley Tyrner, promoting food security is essential to improving health.

you because I'm a Black woman from the South, and climbing the corporate ladder in health care was not easy.' Her members needed food, and she would participate in the program. But she told me, 'If you can't keep up with the volume for my customers, I'm going to lose my job.'

We decided to focus solely on the health care market because the government needed partners in the private sector, and we could have first-mover advantage. We already had distribution hubs in different parts of the country. One of the biggest produce distributors handles our packing operations and buying, and FedEx delivers the box. We really pioneered this space, where the government or health plan pays for the food, not the member."

How I Hustled My Way Out of My Neighborhood and Made It to Hollywood

Ernest Dukes grew his publicity firm 1,920 percent in three years thanks to a little grit. *—As told to Kevin Ryan*

Abridged from the September 2023 Issue.

A

An increasing number of Hollywood stars call on Ernest Dukes when they need to get the hype train rolling. As the founder of Los Angeles-based Nottingham Agency (No. 293 on the 2023 Inc. 5000), Dukes creates publicity campaigns for musicians, actors, athletes, films, and TV shows. His client roster includes William H. Macy, Nick Cannon, and films like Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse. *Dukes, 33, founded the agency in 2009 when he was a teenager—an exceptional feat for anyone, but especially for someone who was passed between various caretakers while growing up in Santa Ana, California.*

"Santa Ana is a rough community. It's not the Orange County you see on TV. I was the first male in my family to graduate high school. For a while, I wanted to be a rapper or an actor. We were only 45 minutes from Hollywood, but it felt like a long way. I saved some money and went to acting classes and met all these cool kids, and then everyone in the class started to book work with the Disney Channel and Nickelodeon and I didn't book anything.

Around that time I went to a party, and my friend's mom, a publicist named Chanel Green, was there. I kept going over to the adults' circle and asking her about her job. My thinking was: If I knew all these people from the acting classes who were booking things, what could I do to monetize those relationships? I told her I wanted to learn, and she let me intern for her.

That's when I fell in love with the world of publicity. I loved being creative, being responsible for bringing an idea to life. I started working with a woman from *Basketball Wives*. None of the other ladies on the show had publicists, so they all hired me.

People in entertainment really looked down on reality TV. But over time, these stars became more visible and started getting invited to red carpets, and I started getting musicians and TV and movie stars as clients. Last year, our eight-employee firm had 40 or 50 campaigns.

As I've grown the business, it's been challenging figuring out what I don't know, what my strengths are, and how to make up for my weaknesses. Over time, I've realized there are an unlimited number of ways to learn. It takes a certain amount of maturity for your mind to get there. A few years ago, I hired Chanel as my SVP, which helped bring things full circle."

STAR POWER
Ernest Dukes turned personal relationships into a publicity business.

Inc.5000 COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

Nº3406 2023 Ranking

147% 3-Year Growth

30 Employees

HQ Dallas, Texas

Playing the Long Game: A Business Concept Worth the Wait

URComped provides casino players with complimentary offers to new casinos.

Craig Shacklett's lightbulb moment happened in 2008. At age 24, he was working as a casino host on a cruise ship. While onboard, he had noticed something: some players were traveling for free because of their previous play on the cruise line, while others had paid full price even though they were bigger gamblers than the players who were comped.

"They didn't have a way to prove before their trip that they were big enough gamblers to get a free cruise," Shacklett explains. "The reason was that casinos don't share data about their players, because they don't want competitors to market to them."

Shacklett reflected on his observation throughout the first half of his six-month contract. A revelation hit him as they sailed away from St. Petersburg, Russia. If players uploaded photos of casino offers from other resorts and cruise lines, Shacklett could reverse-engineer how much the players were worth and then use that info to unlock casino offers at different resorts and cruise lines.

→ Co-founders Craig Shacklett (left), CEO, URComped, and Cale Sherry, CTO

UNDERSTANDING HOUSE ECONOMICS

Shacklett's idea was inspired by his previous job in marketing at Harrah's Lake Tahoe. "Basically, I stared at spreadsheets all day. The rows were segments showing the value of the player, and the columns were the offers we would send them," he says. "Someone who spent $100-200 per day might receive $25 in free play, while someone who spent up to $400 per day might get two free nights plus $50 in free play," he explains.

He understood "casino economics" well enough to create value for the industry. But when he pitched his idea to a few investors, he came up short, perhaps because of timing—in 2008, during the Great Recession. Shacklett decided to table his dream for a while. He moved to Texas with his wife for a job selling software.

AN IDEA WORTH WAITING FOR

In 2014, while taking a nighttime master's degree program, his dream resurfaced. His professor wanted each student to present a business plan. He had one ready. "I pitched the URComped concept. Somebody in class said, 'Hey, man, that's a good idea. I know a tech guy who is entrepreneurial like you." The "tech guy" was Cale Sherry, URComped's CTO and co-founder. In 2015, they found their first investor and quit their jobs. Gaining traction with resorts and cruise companies took longer than Shacklett thought it would. But he kept cold calling until he got his first "yes." Success snowballed from there.

With hundreds of thousands of members, URComped has become the number one casino booking source for the cruise industry and also is expanding with land-based casinos. For individuals, URComped is a free, easy way to access complimentary offers from casinos they have never been to before. Members are happy, the casinos and cruise lines are happy, and Shacklett is confident URComped was worth the wait. "We are feeling optimistic," he says. "I think we will rank even higher on the Inc. 5000 list next year."

URCOMPED.COM

Inc.5000 COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

Nº279	2018%	$11M	24
2023 Ranking	3-Year Growth	2022 Revenue	Employees

How One Agency Transforms Marketing Campaigns With AI

Skyrush Marketing uses the power of artificial intelligence to combine technology and creativity on behalf of its clients.

Most successful marketing agencies specialize in eye-popping creative work, but many lack the technical prowess to build dynamic websites and mobile apps that compel consumers to click and open their wallets. Skyrush Marketing, a Bohemia, New York-based digital marketing agency, is the rare exception that does both.

Skyrush uses artificial intelligence (AI) to help companies execute data-driven, highly targeted campaigns. The agency brings together skilled marketers, data scientists, and programmers to create a one-stop marketing shop for clients in legal, medical, automotive, and e-commerce industries.

"While there are many website and application development firms and many digital marketing firms, we found there were not many that could perform both services at a high level," says Andrew Aiello, Skyrush's founder and president.

Skyrush has built an AI-powered marketing agency that bridges the gap between creative and technical services, landing in the 279th spot on the Inc. 5000 list of America's fastest-growing private companies.

HARNESSING AI FOR BETTER MARKETING

Founded in 2013, Skyrush is the byproduct of the skills Aiello has cultivated during his 25-year career. Early on, Aiello worked in the design and execution side of the business. Later, he studied computer science, developing strong technical skills he applied to his client work.

Today, a passion for harnessing the latest technology anchors Skyrush's work. The agency helps companies increase revenue for specific products, reach highly targeted audiences, and improve back-end efficiency. Skyrush uses AI to drive automation, build tailored customer profiles, and deliver effective messaging.

Skyrush's programmers have also used AI to audit back-end code, build more engaging campaigns and enhance the customer experience. The company recently used the technology to cull information on more than 70,000 products on a jeweler's website, creating customer summaries detailing each diamond's size, cut, and clarity—a feat that likely would have taken months without AI.

→ Andrew Aiello, president, Skyrush Marketing

Some of the work Skyrush does for clients isn't customer-facing but is just as critical in a world where data now differentiates businesses. Skyrush built a global online marketplace for a major online retailer, providing advanced selling capabilities to individual franchisees and allowing the retailer to continuously gather market penetration and sales data. The retailer has achieved 38 percent sales growth since the implementation.

THE POWER OF PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY

While technology is Skyrush's secret weapon, Aiello says the team he's built is the perfect complement to the agency's technology-enabled approach. He constantly recruits high-level marketing talent, and every client always has at least one C-suite executive on their account.

While there are ongoing concerns about how AI could affect jobs, Skyrush shows how companies can bring people and emerging technology together to deliver results. Aiello says Skyrush will continue to use AI to innovate.

"Technology is rapidly evolving. AI is a big driver of this change," he says. "Our goal is to remain at the forefront of the latest technology advances."

SKYRUSHMARKETING.COM

He can’t drive

He fled his homeland at age 8. Began school at 11. Was a tennis champ at 17. Launched a skyrocketing company at 23, and now an even more skyrocketing one at 29. Armir Harris—like the business he’s built—knows only one speed: growing. *—Christine Lagorio-Chafkin*

Abridged from the September 2023 Issue.

When Armir Harris thinks back to the home his family fled in Vlorë, Albania, where the foothills of the Ceraunian Mountains meet the Adriatic Sea, Armir Harris doesn’t seem particularly wistful. Yes, it was beautiful. Yes, there were beaches. Yes, they went every weekend. But when he was 7, a brutal civil war broke out. Gunshots outside of his window meant his mother kept his sister and him inside—all day, all night—for months. Then, one night, at 3 a.m., his mother hailed a cab to the airport, and they left, with what they could carry. He tells the story quickly. He’s eager to move on.

The fact is, fleeing the violence began a nearly four-year stretch of Harris’s life without formal education. A stretch that, at times, meant his only bed was a makeshift one, outdoors, or in an Amtrak station. Or on a bus. Twenty years later, he doesn’t love to talk about it. Friends can know him for years without his telling them he’s a refugee, or that much of his childhood was spent homeless, or helping his mom at any job she could get—including cleaning a restaurant at 2 a.m.

Another thing Harris, today, at 34, gets uncomfortable dwelling on? His wins. And they have been many, bright contrasts from the poverty and uncertainty of his childhood. For one: In June, he was named EY’s Entrepreneur of the Year for the Gulf South region. To celebrate, his team insisted on taking him out to dinner and drinks. Harris—and this is classic behavior for him, friends say—insisted late at night, after the ceremony, that he needed to get back to work. Take another huge success: Harris’s last company, Shofur, which made the Inc. 5000 in 2017, and was named the 21st-fastest-growing company in America. But as everyone around him was basking in the success and banking on its continuation, Harris saw only holes in the very system he’d built. He poked at them until he dismantled it, and a new company emerged a year later.

Now there’s the fact that his new company, Atlanta-based CharterUp, is one of the fastest-growing companies in America—to be precise, the second-fastest. Which he’s proud of, sure. But pausing to celebrate the highs, or dwelling on the lows, is, to him, the antithesis of the now. The go. The identifying of problems—and finding of solutions. The unlocking of market fit and fast growth. Meeting demand on the supply side and, at once, the demand side. For Harris, this is the way forward. And dwelling on a painful past, or marking a little victory, is just a roadblock to the company-building that he lives for.

The first time it happened for him, it seemed so obvious: He’d dropped out of college to help his uncle with his limo-and-bus company in Charlotte, North Carolina, when, in 2012, the Democratic National Committee called. It needed 60 buses. Harris didn’t have 60 buses. He had a few party buses, one of which featured a central pole—which felt inappropriate for the job. “I made a split-second decision and said, ‘I can get you 60 buses,’” he recalls. He started local, and realized all the small bus companies had been booked. He called companies in nearby states, securing a few buses at a time. “I don’t think I got more than three or four hours of sleep

NO. 2

CHARTERUP CEO: ARMIR HARRIS

CATEGORY: TRAVEL & HOSPITALITY

THREE-YEAR REVENUE GROWTH: 111,130%

"I made a split-second decision and said, 'I can get you 60 buses,'" says Armir Harris, CharterUp founder.

a night for days, but I did take a shower, and it was then the light bulb went on." He thought: All that calling, that booking, that inventory management he'd just pulled off—couldn't it be done efficiently, using software? He'd build a website to aggregate bus booking. In 2013, with $800, he launched Shofur. By 2017, it had more than $12 million in revenue, and landed on the Inc. 5000. And that's when he started to not want to celebrate.

"Do you know *The Innovator's Dilemma*?" Harris asks. You see, he could have sold Shofur for $50 million, maybe $100 million, and retired in Hawaii. But then he couldn't have tested out his next thesis. While running Shofur, he'd uncovered myriad challenges hindering the small bus companies listing on its site. He knew many of them were still doing inventory on scratch paper, or on DOS-based programs, managing drivers who accepted only

18 Million

The number of miles traveled on 120,000 bus trips facilitated by CharterUp in 2022

cash, booking new trips through landline phones. He'd built a cool little startup, but he hadn't solved their problems. What if he could? What if he could track inventory in real time, and feed demand based on availability? It had been done for the hotel industry, airlines, even cargo ships. But charter buses? No innovation in decades. "I realized that to win requires really capturing utter market dominance and turning the industry over on its head," he says. His thriving business be damned. What Harris needed was to step on the gas.

There was a time Harris seemed destined for professional tennis. It began when he was about 14 years old and picked up a racket at a park near his home in St. Louis. He'd play anyone: little kids, 65-year-olds. Sometimes, he'd persuade a local instructor to teach him strokes. In exchange, he'd tidy the facilities. Within a few years, he was playing—and winning—tournaments, a self-taught kid with wild form and a fiercely competitive nature. At 17, Harris for a time ranked No. 1 in the men's U.S.T.A. Southern Section.

A visit to his older sister at Duke University convinced him college might be a better bet. She'd landed financial aid; he figured he'd do the same—and keep working. He finished his GED in seven months, crammed for the SAT, and got into Boston University. His freshman year, he earned the first A of his life, in microeconomics 101; he began to focus on business and accounting classes.

When his uncle fell ill, Harris flew back to Charlotte to run his limousine-rental outfit. It was a business he already knew, having helped there as a teen, fueling up cars and cleaning them at 5 a.m. before school. What had been a one-car outfit then had by 2012 grown to 25 vehicles: limos, vans, and party buses. With its books in his hands, Harris now found it to be both sluggish and capital-intensive. And then the DNC called—and came his epiphany.

Five years later, working within Shofur, Harris set up a skunkworks, a tiny team of engineers to test out a marketplace for charter buses. He'd already built better bookings for buses, and turned it into one of the fastest-growing businesses in the country in 2017. But it wasn't solving the real-time problems of the little bus companies—hundreds of mostly mom-and-pop shops, nearly 70 percent of which own fewer than 10 buses. "A lot of them lacked the scale to get any sophistication around their sales, around their marketing," Harris says. Could he take that all on? Build software to integrate real-time tracking with rideshare logistics management—and an online search engine with a booking platform?

"The pace at which Armir incorporates new learning is a key advantage of his. He is not afraid to say, 'We have this new information, and the direction we were going in no longer makes sense,'" says Howard Bornstein, president of CharterUp. "Other people—myself included—would slow down. He will make the turn on a dime."

Harris called it CharterUp. A friend who believed the model might also work on charter planes, Nick Parsa, joined. They tested it in Atlanta, where Shofur was based. Within months, conversions were higher. Customer retention was higher. "We really started to lean in," Harris says. They hired dozens of people through 2019 and made plans to expand to other cities and scale.

And then the pandemic hit. "It was a 95 percent negative demand shock," he says. He furloughed 75 percent of the staff. By this time, he'd already seen hesitancy in the businesses they were aiming to serve: CharterUp required that tracking hardware and third-party software be integrated into every vehicle in its fleet. It required companies to share that data—and

Says Harris: "I thrive on obstacles. The more obstacles there are, the more obsessed I'm going to be."

open themselves up to user reviews. For his idea to survive a global health crisis, it would need a stronger foundation.

Operating virtually, Harris and Parsa took product lead, and with a handful of engineers, focused on rebuilding the backend technology to scale fast, and to function for everything from individual wedding parties to governments, college sports teams, and disaster relief. They'd move massive numbers of people, fast. They'd provide a data-driven case to the bus owners that it would be worthwhile. They'd optimize inventory management for them. If their fleet was, on average, sitting idle

"Other people—myself included—would slow down. He will make the turn on a dime."

—Howard Bornstein, president of CharterUp

for 70 percent of the time, they'd aim to use the platform to drive bookings and flip that ratio. CharterUp software would become systems of record. They'd take over marketing, optimizing hyperlocal ads and SEO straight to CharterUp. There was doubt, of course, this being at the start of the pandemic, with zero bus bookings, zero revenue, and all remaining employees suffering huge pay cuts. But Parsa, who'd become vice president of strategy, saw a glimmer of hope: "When people start traveling again, some of these bus companies are gonna be out of business, and we're gonna be right there to scoop it all up."

That grim insight is now taking root. More than 20 percent of bus companies—some 500 in all, according to the American Bus Association—were out of business by January 2021. Those remaining now have CharterUp as a reliable bookings generator. "After the first couple of months, I could see it: There were more runs available," says Mark Thronson's small limo and charter bus company, Elite Transportation of San Antonio. "We'd come in in the morning and there were booking requests to approve."

Inc.5000 COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

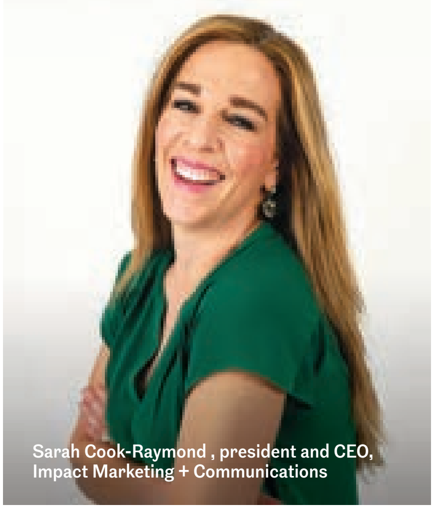
Nº2366	233%	$2.5M+	14	IMPACT MARKETING + COMMUNICATIONS®
2023 Ranking	3-Year Growth	2022 Revenue	Employees	

How an Accidental Entrepreneur Built an Inc. 5000 Company

The president and CEO of Impact Marketing + Communications never imagined she'd own one of the fastest-growing private companies in America.

When Sarah Cook-Raymond's boss asked if she would like to buy his company, she surprised herself by saying, "Yes." A writer by trade, she had been working at Impact Marketing + Communications, a Washington, D.C.-based agency, since 2005. When the company lost its biggest federal contract in 2016, her boss contemplated closing the company altogether. Instead, he asked Cook-Raymond to take over.

"I joke that I'm the accidental entrepreneur," she says. "I never thought that I would be a business owner." At the time her boss approached her, she and her husband were in the process of adopting their first child. "So, it was this big life moment of becoming a first-time entrepreneur and a first-time mom at the same time," she adds.



Sarah Cook-Raymond , president and CEO, Impact Marketing + Communications

TAKING CHANCES

As a new mother, Cook-Raymond says her "why" and "for whom" were crystal-clear. "It was a lot of tireless nights that felt equal parts baby and business development, but I knew failure wasn't an option," she says.

Re-imagining the business meant going full throttle with business development and pushing herself beyond her comfort zone. "When your job entails being behind the scenes and making others look good, it's a different prospect to turn around and market yourself, but that's how you grow," she says. The more people she met, the more often she was invited to "new spaces," approached for new opportunities—and the more she learned.

THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY ADVANTAGE

As part of her growth strategy, Cook-Raymond forged partnerships with complementary agencies and teamed up to win business together. She also assembled an impressive, multi-disciplinary team so the firm could offer the design services of a creative agency, the strategy of a marketing agency, and the editorial services of a communications shop, as well as complicated research translation and training and technical assistance services that require domain and subject matter expertise. The company's vast experience in public health supports a range of mission-driven work—including projects on maternal and child health, infectious diseases, substance use disorders, mental health and suicide prevention, and clinical cancer research—that attracts talent. "It feels good that most of the clients we work with are trying to make the world a better place," she explains.

With determination and strategy, Cook-Raymond has shepherded Impact Marketing + Communications from a flailing business to a full-service, integrated marketing and communications firm. Her team has earned seven international creative awards, a Digital Agency Elite award, a PRNews Top Place to Work honor, and, of course, an Inc. 5000 honor.

"I can say this now that I'm on the other side, but losing that big client showed me that sometimes failure—so long as we learn from it—can be a blessing," she says. "It forced our company to diversify and evolve into something even better."

IMPACTMARKETING.COM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Inc.5000
COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

Nº4723
2023 Ranking

84%
3-Year Growth

$900M+
Generated Client Revenue

105
Employees

XENOPSI

Divide to Conquer: Companies Thrive in New Structure

With a move to run several distinct business operations in their own lanes, XenoPsi Ventures has revved up its growth.

When speaking to prospective clients, explaining XenoPsi Ventures's (XPV) lines of business wasn't always easy. For some clients, the need was political consulting. For others, it was marketing expertise in the indulgence brand space. Additionally, the company launched its own brand, Wellow compression socks, just over a year ago. Last year, when it celebrated its 25th anniversary, XPV reorganized its areas of expertise into a portfolio of separate operating companies, each with a specific focus.

"As we grew, XenoPsi came to encompass so much—from selling some of the country's best bourbons to managing nationwide political campaigns," says XPV President MichaelAaron Flicker, who founded the privately held brand incubator firm when he was a high school freshman in 1997. "By evolving the companies, we gave ourselves better distinction in the marketplace, and we gave the people that work here a clearer mission and a clearer charter."

BUSINESS POWERED BY BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE

XPV, based in New York City, restructured its company by areas of specialization. Function Growth offers executive suite expertise in such areas as brand development, marketing, and data management to early-stage, founder-led, direct-to-consumer brands in exchange for equity and revenue shares. Its client base doubled in 2022. Method1, which grew its topline revenue by 24 percent in 2022, creates digital-first marketing systems for indulgence brands. Wellow, XPV's first consumer packaged goods brand, sells premium compression socks to more than 100,000 customers. XPV plans to launch two additional company-owned brands in 2024.

"The main growth driver that links all of our companies together is our belief in behavioral science," Flicker says.

For example, in launching a new line of wide-calf compression socks, Function Growth applied a principle called "social proof"—the idea that people gravitate toward behaviors they view as popular. The company shared testimonials and hired influencers to endorse Wellow products to their followers.

ESTABLISHING A TEAM OF PROVEN LEADERS

In 2020, XPV invested in recruiting top people to run its businesses which boosted its client base and has allowed the operating companies to develop and mature faster than when all functions were siloed in one company.

Paul Nelson, hired in 2022 as managing director of Method1, was previously an executive vice president and managing director at Arnold Worldwide. Another notable find was Kyle Hoffman, who joined in 2021 to be director of growth strategy for Function Growth.

There are also top people who have grown with the company and helped drive its expansion like Salman Javed, partner, who has been with XenoPsi for 17 years.

Flicker likes to focus on the full team of 105 people as the folks who really power XenoPsi's growth. "It's not just one leader," he says. "It's about a team of people driving the success beyond the sum of their parts."

XENOPSI.COM

→ **MichaelAaron Flicker, founder and president (left) and Salman Javed, partner, XenoPsi Ventures**

How I Reached My Mortgage Customers Where They Were —on TikTok

Founder Anthony Lee beat rising interest rates with viral videos. *—As told to Ali Donaldson*

From the September 2023 Issue

A

Anthony Lee, 50, missed his high school graduation, in 1991, because his daughter arrived that same day. To provide for his new family, he enlisted in the U.S. Air Force, shipped off to Iraq for Operation Desert Storm, and over the next 23 years notched combat tours in three wars before rising to the rank of major, in a post at the Pentagon. (Along the way he got divorced and remarried, and now has five children.) After retiring from active duty, Lee started working in real estate and, in 2016, founded Zap Mortgage (No. 294 on the 2023 Inc. 5000), now based in Tampa, a lender that caters to veterans and service members, many of whom have poor credit. Business was going well until interest rates spiked—and Zap's leads started drying up. That's when Lee decided to go after customers where they scroll.

"I first learned about TikTok in 2019 from my then-14-year-old daughter. I thought, 'It's just teenage girls dancing on video.' As it went more mainstream, I watched the mortgage videos and thought, 'I can do better than that.' Like any good student would, I took a class—a $500 webinar that taught me how to shoot, how to pose, the best timeline, how the algorithm works. It went pretty in-depth, and I took notes.

We started posting on the Zap Mortgage account in the summer of 2022. The videos are anywhere from 5.8 seconds to 7.1 seconds long, and I know that down to a 10th of a second. There needs to be a catchy song, and the words have to exceed 200 characters. Here's why: I need the viewer to be able to read the screen but not get through every single word, so then the video has to play again. Each view turns into two or three views.

After posting 10 or so videos, I did one about low credit scores. We got into the algorithm, and it went viral with 3.5 million views. The next month, we had a 1,500 percent increase in applications. One of my production managers was at a gas station in his Zap Mortgage polo, and someone said, 'Do you work for the guy who dances on TikTok?' Those millions of views truly made a difference. I'm not Rocket Mortgage. We were able to get our name out there for free, and it spread quickly.

> **"One of my production managers was at a gas station in his Zap Mortgage polo, and someone said 'Do you work for the guy who dances on TikTok?'"**

Then, you can expand that reach. Our TikTok is all organic, but you can save those videos and turn them into paid ads. I test videos on TikTok. If they hit, I know that if I go to Facebook, Google, or other platforms and put advertising dollars behind them, I'll get more applications.

With that influx of business, we've been able to stay in the fight. Interest rates are still up. Loan officers and agents have left the industry in the past year and a half. We didn't have to close our doors like other lenders.

When you're online, as I am now, the haters come. We get comments on videos like, 'Is this a scam?' People don't believe it.

What's different about Zap Mortgage is that we service clients with low credit scores—people other lenders wouldn't even talk to. We're experts in government-backed mortgage loans offered through the Federal Housing Administration, usually reserved for first-time homebuyers, and the Department of Veterans Affairs, which are specifically for people who have served, are serving, or are surviving spouses of military members. Government-backed loans will go down to a 500 credit score. From a busi-

GONE VIRAL
Anthony Lee got into TikTok's algorithm and leads took off.

ness standpoint, these are riskier loans, and you cannot make as much money on them—there are very strict guidelines. My profit margin goes down by about 25 percent, but we make up for it in volume.

With rents rising, there is this whole population paying anywhere from $2,000 to $3,500 a month. They could pay a mortgage for the same amount, but they aren't given the opportunity because of their credit scores. Why not go after that?

Few other lenders do this, because it's hard. We manually underwrite loans—we have a person sitting there going through everything in an application. On paper, they don't look like the best bet, but we can help clients improve their credit. We tell them, 'After six months to a year of perfect mortgage payments, your credit score is going to shoot up so much that we'll be able to refinance you into a much lower rate.' We can hear that moment when the conversation turns. They start believing that homeownership—something they never thought they could achieve in their life—is actually possible."

PHOTOGRAPH BY ZACK WITTMAN

Inc.5000 COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

Nº229	2441%	4.9/5	97
2023 Ranking	3-Year Growth	Google Rating	Employees

A Vision to Modernize Insurance

Orion180 uses technology to streamline the insurance process for retail brokers and customers.

The Orion180 team was always confident they were onto something big. This belief was confirmed at a major insurance industry conference in 2022 when hundreds of attendees took the time to stop by the booth to tell employees how much they loved the company's system.

Orion180 had done something few other companies had—made the process of quoting, binding (meaning selling), and managing customer insurance policies fast and simple. As a result, retail brokers were making more money by leveraging real-time business intelligence, while providing unparalleled customer support. Orion180's policy management platform MY180 made it possible.

"Technology has been lagging in the business-to-business (B2B) insurance space forever," says Kenneth Gregg, founder and CEO of insurance carrier Orion180. He would know, having spent 26 years in the industry, including at some of the largest insurance companies in the world, Allianz and AXA. Those years of experience helped Gregg see the industry's major pain point: technology. In response, he built a proprietary technology platform from scratch to address that bottleneck.

"Technology and people are the focus of our business. When I created the company, my vision was to use technology as the difference-maker to enhance the lives of individuals," Gregg explains. He wanted to make the process of selling and managing insurance policies as easy as possible, intuitive even, for both broker and consumer.

TIME IS MONEY

Retail brokers make their living by quoting and binding consumer insurance policies. Using MY180, "In as little as four minutes, brokers can quote, bind, and issue an insurance policy," Gregg confirms, "where at other companies, it's going to take multiples of that."

However, a secondary goal for Orion180 was building a tool that would provide better insights. "It provides us all real-time information regarding every aspect of the business."

The positive response to the system was immediate, and at the 12-month mark, the company was cash flow positive. "We've been profitable ever since," Gregg says. Not that it was easy.

Kenneth Gregg, founder and CEO, Orion180

BOOTSTRAPPED FROM THE BEGINNING

Although Orion180 has achieved exponential growth since its founding in 2018, that progress was achieved "one policy at a time," according to Gregg. The many hurdles the team faced along the way included lack of institutional capital and cancellation of the company's front-end service provider on day one. Gregg's solution was to turn to individual investors, who put up less than $450,000—just enough to help pay the first year's burn rate.

Less than two years later, the pandemic hit, requiring the company to adapt again. The reinsurance market has become challenging, the cost of capital has risen, and interest rate hikes have chilled the home-buying market, but Orion180 continues to grow at breakneck speed.

That growth has only been possible because of the company's culture, says Gregg, which tries to provide the best experience for its customers and team members.

Clearly, it's working, since Orion180 was named a Top Insurance Employer of the Year for 2023 by Insurance Business America (IBA).

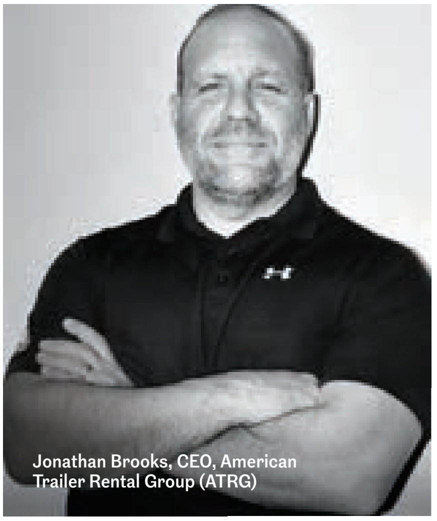
ORION180.COM

Inc.5000 COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

Nº1320	440%	250	39K
2023 Ranking	3-Year Growth	Employees	Rental Assets

Warehouses on Wheels

American Trailer Rental Group (ATRG) found exponential growth renting trailers and containers to organizations in need of flexible storage space.



Jonathan Brooks, CEO, American Trailer Rental Group (ATRG)

With U.S. warehouse occupancy exceeding 95 percent, per CBRE, companies are running out of space to store raw materials, inventory, and returns. That's good news for American Trailer Rental Group (ATRG), says its CEO Jonathan Brooks. He explains, "Our solution is basically a warehouse on wheels."

What started in 2017 with Milton Street Capital's purchase of Meisler Trailer Rental has mushroomed from two locations and approximately 4,000 trailers to 33 locations and 39,000 trailers and containers. Brooks was hired as CEO at the outset, bringing finance and operations experience in the equipment rental space to the venture.

CULTURE AT THE CORE

ATRG's growth has been fueled by more than 20 acquisitions in little more than five years. Some companies might struggle with rapid-fire socialization, but not this one.

"We're able to buy family-owned businesses and integrate them into our larger business within the first 60 days and really instill the foundations of our culture," Brooks says. That culture emphasizes basic concepts, he says, including doing the right thing, a can-do attitude, and making sure people know how much they matter to the company.

OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE

A trailer in constant use hauling products across the country generally lasts 10 to 15 years, Brooks says. At that point, many trucking firms sell the trailer and buy a new one. That's where ATRG steps in, acquiring the used trailer and overhauling it with new mechanicals and paint. Once renovated, the company turns around and rents it to organizations ranging from automotive manufacturers to plastics manufacturers and nonprofit organizations in need of flexible storage. The reason many companies elect not to purchase a trailer is that there is specialized knowledge associated with maintaining them that some organizations choose not to acquire. Instead, they opt to "flex in and out of these trailers as needed. They don't have to make the long-term capital commitment," says Brooks. "We're an on-demand solution."

Instead, they can rent a trailer on a 30-day evergreen contract, meaning that on Day 31, if the client still has the trailer, the contract is automatically renewed for another 30 days. On average, ATRG customers keep trailers for 26 months.

In addition to full warehouses, Brooks also sees reshoring and the reverse logistics piece of e-commerce generating increasing need for storage capacity. As companies move production back to the U.S. and Mexico, they create "new operating footprints that will need trailers to store things and move things short distances," he says. Rising reliance on online shopping is also creating "an increased flow of products being returned," he says, that need to be shipped back to the retailer.

While current trends have certainly supported ATRG's growth, Brooks believes that culture is the real driver. "We've built an ecosystem where people want to work here," Brooks says. The company places an emphasis on constantly monitoring employee engagement, which is a key performance indicator as important as any other metric on the profit and loss statement, he says.

AMERICANTRG.COM

A Sincere Congrats.

Welcome to the Inc. 5000 Conference & Gala, and a sincere congrats on making the Inc. 5000 list. It's a prestigious honor, and we're sure the future has even more electrifying success in store. Oh, and speaking of electrifying, visit our booth and ask about the all-new fully electric eSprinter. Emissions-free and full of potential, this is how forward-looking businesses will achieve more–more efficiently.

From all of us Mercedes-Benz Vans, we look forward to meeting you!

Iain Forsyth
Director, Marketing & Product Management
Mercedes-Benz Vans

Mercedesbenzvans.com

Congratulations to the bold companies on the Inc. 5000 list.

You've shown us the way to achieve more – and this is how we'll do it, more sustainably.

Introducing the all-new, all-electric eSprinter – the first emissions-free, battery-powered van bearing the Mercedes-Benz Star. It's fully electric, and full of potential, with the innovative connectivity, safety, and load capacity that you would expect from the Mercedes-Benz Sprinter. So, load it up with your biggest dreams.

Congratulations again to those on the Inc. 5000 list. Here's to an electric – and electrifying – future.

The all-new eSprinter.

eSPRINTER

Christian and Rasmus Mikkelsen earned their first million dollars at age 25. The twins' second million came four days later, crowning a swift climb up from rock bottom, when they lived rent-free in a family apartment in Denmark, smoking weed and bingeing *Breaking Bad*. In a flash of self-awareness, they skulked back to their parents' home in New Jersey. Dad had an idea: college! The boys enrolled in an associate's degree program for exercise science, and proceeded to ace every course.

Thus began the Mikkelsens' tactical approach to life and business. With the loose vision of being digital nomads, they searched "how to make money online," leading Christian to publish a book on Amazon titled *How to Be a 4.0 Student in*

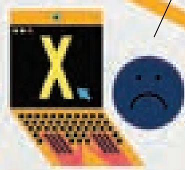
DARK DAYS IN DENMARK
Rasmus: "One night in bed, I remember thinking, 'If I die, will anyone even notice?' "

2015 JOINT INCOME: $17,000*

TWIN ACES
Rasmus, on getting straight A's: "That honestly changed our self-confidence and what we thought was possible."

2016 JOINT INCOME: $26,000*

FLEDGLING FOUNDERS
Christian: "I didn't even know what *entrepreneur* meant."



STOP THE PRESSES
Christian, on Amazon's pulling the plug: "This is the thing we feared. Could it all be taken away?"

2018 JOINT INCOME: $180,000*

2017 JOINT INCOME: $75,000*

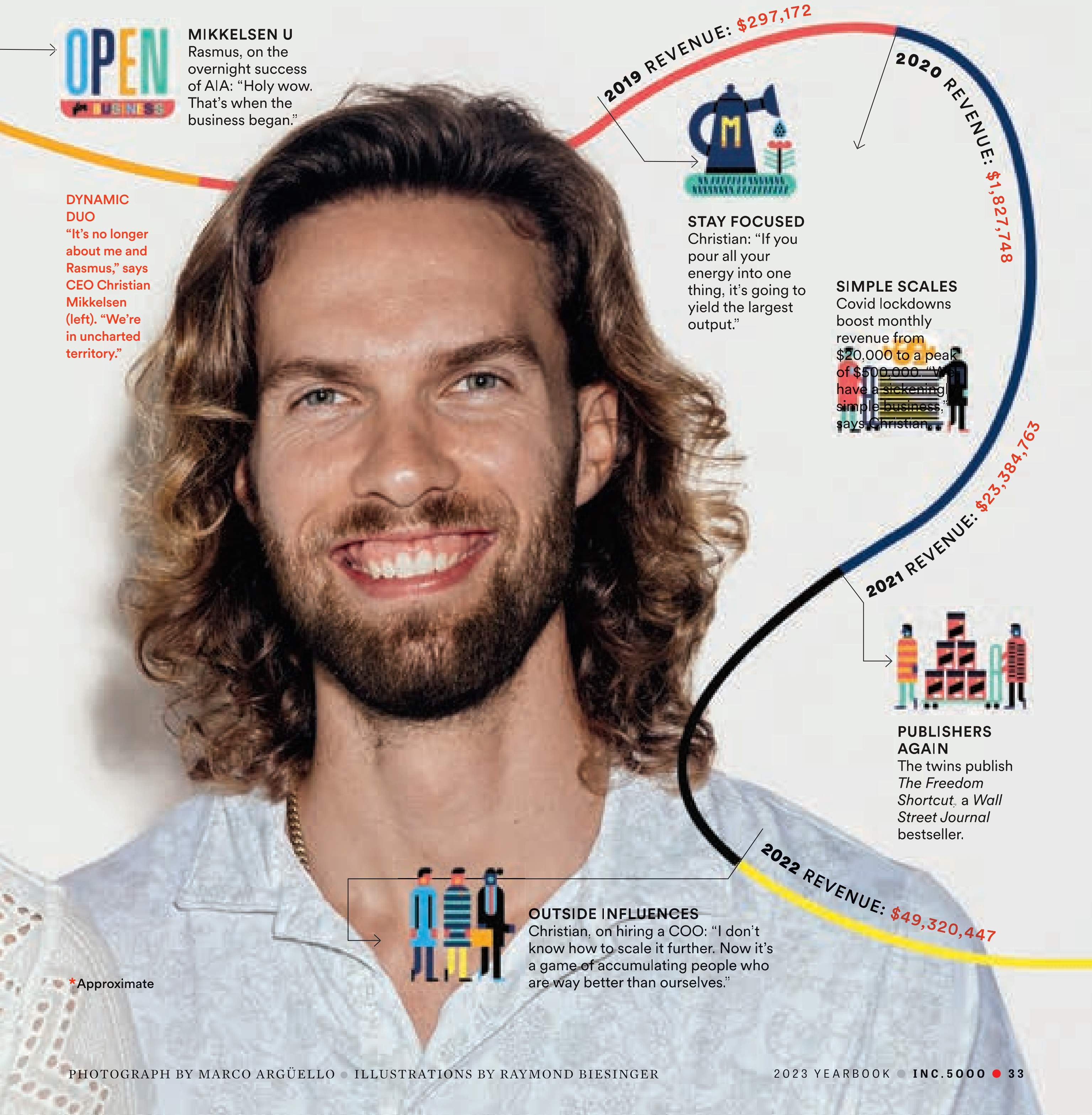
GOODBYE, COLLEGE
Rasmus: "It was important to not have a plan B."

DOES IT GET ANY BETTER THAN THIS?

The Mikkelsen twins live in a universe where 1 + 1 = oh, around **$50 million** a year. It's called Publishing.com, No. 19 on this year's Inc. 5000. —*Eric Hagerman*

Abridged from the September 2023 Issue.

College, Like Me. It sold, so Rasmus followed suit with a cross-training manual. Suddenly, they were in the publishing business. To scale, they hired ghostwriters, and once combined earnings grew to around $3,000 a month, they quit school and moved to Thailand, where the internet was fast and the living cheap. Next stop: Hawaii. "It was euphoric," says Chistian. "I told Rasmus literally every day, 'This is the new best day of my life.'" Indeed it was—until Amazon shut down Christian's primary account. Turns out, you can't just run text from a book in English through Google Translate and sell it as a foreign-language edition. Rasmus lost his account, too (same IP address). Now what? A pivot to producing YouTube videos teaching hopeful souls how to do what they'd done, with a focus on audiobooks. They rolled up their advice into an online course called Audiobook Income Academy and promoted it at a 50 percent discount the day it launched. It brought in $48,000 overnight. "I've never felt richer in my entire life," says Christian. "And here we are now—accidentally—with a $50 million-a-year business."



MIKKELSEN U
Rasmus, on the overnight success of AIA: "Holy wow. That's when the business began."

DYNAMIC DUO
"It's no longer about me and Rasmus," says CEO Christian Mikkelsen (left). "We're in uncharted territory."

STAY FOCUSED
Christian: "If you pour all your energy into one thing, it's going to yield the largest output."

SIMPLE SCALES
Covid lockdowns boost monthly revenue from $20,000 to a peak of $500,000. "We have a sickeningly simple business," says Christian.

PUBLISHERS AGAIN
The twins publish *The Freedom Shortcut*, a *Wall Street Journal* bestseller.

OUTSIDE INFLUENCES
Christian, on hiring a COO: "I don't know how to scale it further. Now it's a game of accumulating people who are way better than ourselves."

*Approximate

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARCO ARGÜELLO • ILLUSTRATIONS BY RAYMOND BIESINGER

Inc.5000
COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

N°2727	197%	11	HQ
2023 Ranking	3-Year Growth	Employees	Reno, Nev.

The Most Sustainable Goods Also Last the Longest

Prioritizing durability and waste reduction, Responsible Consumer Products ramps up its sales to a more sophisticated, environmentally-conscious market.

From the outset, Responsible Consumer Products—encompassing the KoverRoos brand of casual furniture covers and the Golden Care line of furniture cleaners and protectors—was dedicated to operating sustainably. Founded in 1985, RCP led the way in eliminating polyvinyl chloride from outdoor furniture covers. Over the years, the company has introduced a variety of safer materials that better protect the furniture from mold, mildew, and ultraviolet radiation.

Making products that degrade more slowly and last longer has become the overarching goal of RCP's sustainability program.

"About five years ago, we made the decision that the most effective sustainability focus that we could have is reducing what goes into the landfill," says RCP Managing Director Ryan Barlow.

The focus on product durability has also resulted in stronger revenue for RCP. The most recent three-year growth rate of 197 percent is the highest in the company's history.

QUALITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

In keeping with its commitment to waste reduction, RCP manufactures its furniture covers from recyclable materials. The company performs stringent testing of its fabric to ensure that every product meets a maximum durability standard that is four times the industry average. The company estimates that by reducing the need to replace its products, it has helped to cut landfill plastic waste by 1.25 million pounds during the last three years, according to Barlow. He says the decision to switch from plastic packaging to belly bands resulted in an additional reduction of at least 135,000 pounds during the same period.

Headquartered in Reno, Nevada, the company has distribution centers in Michigan, Texas, and Utah. Until 2018, the manufacturing of RCP covers was split evenly between the United States and China. Now 100 percent of the products come out of a Detroit facility where sewing machine operators have been making RCP covers for more than 20 years.

"Part of the reason that we wanted to focus on domestic manufacturing was so that we could control the accountability in the process," Barlow says.

→ Ryan Barlow, managing director, Responsible Consumer Products.

OPERATIONAL ADVANTAGE

Barlow notes that rising labor costs and other challenges are pushing manufacturing businesses like RCP to look toward investments in better technologies and system efficiencies to stay competitive.

Barlow attributes RCP's latest revenue spike to a change in the company's business model. Instead of offering the same options to all of its furniture retail partners, RCP now uses proprietary software to create customized designs for each retailer's furniture line.

"Being able to meet customers' demand for more U.S.-made, high-performing, environmentally friendly projects helped seal the deals," notes RCP Sales and Sustainability Director Margaret Kao.

While some businesses incorporate sustainability measures to give them an edge in marketing or recruiting, Barlow says RCP has a different motivation.

"There's an operational advantage to reducing waste, having control of your processes, and measuring efficacy," Barlow says. "If you're trying to reduce the landfill, that means that you're trying to create a product that lasts longer."

KOVERROOS.COM

Inc.5000 COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

N°1442	401%	$10M	74
2023 Ranking	3-Year Growth	2022 Revenue	Employees

ARTISAN

Tech Consultancy's High-Touch Approach Creates Customer Value

Artisan Studios lives by its culture of having fun and exceeding client expectations, confidently sharing the right advice—with empathy.

Artisan is not a word typically associated with technology. It's more common with high-quality, hand-crafted products like bread. Some bakers get the job done but aren't high touch; the same is true with tech. When founding Artisan Studios in 2019, Tim Mitrovich envisioned a full-service tech strategy and solutions company that provided deep expertise and guidance—an "artisanal" consultancy. At its foundation was Mitrovich's quarter century of hard-earned software, technology, and leadership experience.

The Artisan team thrives on solving problems in multiple industries. "We do a lot of product development, identifying antiquated practices and coming up with better ways of working," says Mitrovich, Artisan's CEO. One solution was a mobile app to simplify a distribution company's process for drivers. Another was developing a portal for the life sciences industry to share and consume research content.

THE SERVANT LEADERSHIP MODEL

Mitrovich puts culture at the forefront, with a servant leadership philosophy: Each person is more important than a project or the business. "As long as you have that mindset, everything else follows," he says. That includes acknowledging people have a life outside of work. Mitrovich says he leads by example, as his daughter sometimes comes into his office for a hug during conference calls.

Even with more than 70 employees, Mitrovich likes to stay involved with the interview process, talking briefly with potential hires to ensure they are a culture fit and can carry on an interesting conversation. "If they're missing a hard skill or don't know a programming language, we can work on that," he says. "If you're not careful about who you bring in, you risk diluting the culture," he says.

Culture is key because Artisan has been remote from the start. The company holds an annual event, Artisan Connect, where employees enjoy connection, social time, and workshops. He also ensures that project teams travel to client sites to connect with each other and the client.

RADICAL CANDOR

Mitrovich practices radical candor, encouraging others to as well. "It's all about delivering messages from a place of empathy—not just saying you care, but demonstrating when you deliver a tough message that you care."

Sometimes these messages aren't what someone wants to hear, but ultimately clients realize the advice is in their best interest. He took over a project where another consultancy assigned five people. Mitrovich recommended just two from Artisan; he knew that additional staffing would cost the client more without improving results.

Mitrovich believes that "if you take care of your people, they'll take care of you. If you take care of your customers, they'll take care of you. If you do both, you have a business." His philosophy is working. He set out to solve interesting problems and work with people he genuinely values. "We enjoy what we do and who we do it with, and we enjoy interactions with our customers. Do that, and growth will follow."

ARTISAN-STUDIOS.COM

→ **Tim Mitrovich, CEO, Artisan Studios, addressing the team during Artisan Connect, in Miami, Florida, last April.**

Light Keeper

Before Kelly Aaron of Blueprint Lighting could hit No. 1,948 on this year's Inc. 5000, she had to take a leap on making her own vintage light fixtures. —*Sal Vaglica*

From the September 2023 Issue.

Kelly Aaron remembers the day a newly acquired pair of 1950s Italian chandeliers got snapped up in a heartbeat at the vintage furniture and lighting boutique she and her husband, Josh, owned in New York City's Chelsea neighborhood. It was 2016. The sale was quick—but insufficient to slow the array of designers and collectors who asked if she could get her hands on additional fixtures or anything that looked like them. "'Do you have any more?' is what they'd ask," Aaron, 47, recalls. "And they wanted them immediately."

Aaron soon realized that tastemakers don't necessarily care about provenance. They were happy to buy faithful reproductions of midcentury lighting fixtures—and to place multiple orders. That light bulb moment inspired the Aarons to start producing new fixtures based on old designs. The next time a pair of the vintage ceiling fixtures came in, they stripped them down to learn how the parts fit together, and how they were wired inside—and how to make new ones that looked and worked like the real thing.

Working out of their garage, they set up a powder-coating booth that required them to unplug their clothes dryer to access their home's only 220-volt outlet. And when demand for the early versions showed no sign of abating, the Aarons decided to shutter their furniture store and start up Blueprint Lighting, which now boasts 20 employees at its Manhattan showroom and New Jersey manufacturing facility. Revenue has skyrocketed from $350,000 in 2017—barely half of what the Aarons' vintage furniture business earned in a year—to a projected $5 million in 2023.

"When we started, I had impostor syndrome," says Aaron, noting that her uneasiness vanished when she and her husband quit copying old designs and started developing their own line of original fixtures. She knew Blueprint Lighting was on the right track for sure when The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel came calling. The set designers of the hit 1950s period comedy wanted a reproduction of a nearly seven-feet-wide midcentury chandelier, along with 64 wall sconces. The Aarons and a single fabricator were able to deliver the goods in about three weeks.

Such nimbleness is one of the selling points that have helped Blueprint finits niche in the roughly $106 billion global decorative lighting market. "We had a restaurant the other day that said they needed lighting in two weeks to pass inspections," says Aaron, "and I said, 'Let's see what we can do.'" And much to the customer's delight, they did.

BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG PROFITS For Kelly Aaron, imitation is the highest form of industry.

Inc.5000 COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

N°562	1041%	$33M	150
2023 Ranking	3-Year Growth	2022 Revenue	Employees

Quick, Creative Solutions for a Dire Health Worker Shortage

Pulse Clinical Alliance deploys fast personnel and technology support to meet regular and emergency medical staff needs.

Whether government or private health care providers face natural disasters, emergencies, or are simply navigating the ongoing health care worker shortage, more than 100 of these providers and systems nationwide rely on Pulse Clinical Alliance for help with staffing. Based in Jacksonville, Florida, the company is a Joint Commission-certified clinical staffing company working with organizations throughout the country to provide traditional staffing and rapid-response solutions.

"When it comes to tricky situations, we're very good at problem solving and providing turnkey solutions," says Pulse CEO Garrett Caplin. Garrett runs the company with Chairman and Founder Ricky Caplin, whose company HCI Group is a seven-time Inc. 5000 honoree.

Garrett credits Pulse's diverse capabilities and strong leadership of Chief Recruitment Officer, Nick Carew, for a three-year growth spurt that topped 1,000 percent only a few years after the company's founding in 2016.

→ Garrett Caplin, CEO (left) and Nick Carew, CRO, Pulse Cinical Alliance

ALLEVIATING THE NURSING SHORTAGE

The International Council of Nurses predicts that the country's nursing shortage could reach 13 million by 2030. Last year, Pulse added two new services—virtual nursing and telesiting—to help its clients address the issue and save money, Garrett says. Quality of care also improves when there are always eyes watching out for the patient's safety. Virtual nurses can immediately address the patient while simultaneously signaling an on-site nurse to the room to improve patient care and safety.

Through third-party partnerships, Pulse also provides the technology that helps workers be more efficient and effective. One example is a tablet-equipped robot that nurses can drive remotely from room to room to help monitor patients. Pulse can also furnish cameras that connect to television monitors and mobile devices to allow video communication among patients and clinical staff.

RESPONDING TO EMERGENCIES

Rapid response is another Pulse advantage. When Hurricane Ian was approaching Florida's west coast in 2022, Pulse deployed more than 400 nurses in less than two weeks to nine counties in the area. Within 48 hours, the company sent out 135 nurses in various specialties to supplement the staff of Lee Health, a public health system in Lee County, Florida. While the state provided shelter for the emergency nurses it hired, Lee Health could not. So, Pulse stepped in to retrofit Lee Health's unused commercial building as living quarters, complete with showers, laundry services, and community spaces.

Pulse's staff of 150 includes nurses, recruiters, account managers, project managers, and coordinators. In addition to its headquarters in Jacksonville, Florida, the company also operates an international division in the Philippines that has expanded its recruitment force. The U.S.-based employees are a close-knit group that the company often treats to outings at Dave & Busters and other team-building activities.

"Yes, it's all business to make sure that the job is done right, so that patients can ultimately receive top-quality care," Caplin says. "But we also make sure that everybody wants to come to work every day because they enjoy being there."

PULSECA.COM

Inc.5000 COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

Nº3148	163%	7000	75
2023 Ranking	3-Year Growth	Locations Offer VI Products	Employees

This CEO's Putting Her Spin on Her Dad's Skincare Legacy

Vitality Institute's CEO steered the company to leadership in medical aesthetics and to a place on the Inc 5000 list.

Marya Khalil-Otto never planned to be a CEO. When her dad passed away unexpectedly in 2013, she took over his skincare business, Vitality Institute. "It wasn't a happy takeover. I avoided calling myself 'CEO' for as long as I could, because it was sad for me. Also, it was intimidating as hell. I was only 25," she says. She still wonders how she summoned the courage to step up, but she believed in the brand's flagship product, the VI Peel, now an industry-leading chemical peel carried in more than 7,000 U.S. practitioner's offices. And she didn't want to disappoint her dad.

Staying busy also helped with the grief. And she has been busy—implementing positive changes that have transformed the Vitality Institute from a fledging business to a leading professional skincare brand and Inc. 5000 honoree. One of the biggest changes was redesigning the look and the feel of the brand. As a Millennial woman, she understood the brand's primary end users in a way her father couldn't. "No offense to Dad, who was obviously a man in his fifties, but I'm so sick and tired of men designing products mainly for women. I really am," she says.

BORN OF NECESSITY

Khalil-Otto's own skincare struggles inspired the brand. Her complexion is radiant now, but as a teenager, her acne was so bad, she avoided making eye contact. When nothing helped, and no professional-grade peels were safe for her skin tone, her father, Dr. Abdala Khalil, an emergency room doctor, created a custom peel for her.

The peel restored her confidence and has since become a favorite among practitioners because it is powerful and effective, pain free, and safe for all skin tones, Khalil-Otto explains. "I love that the beauty industry has moved towards inclusivity. But for our brand, that's been at our core since day one," she says.

TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGES

One thing that hasn't changed, though, is the company's commitment to being a true partner to its customers, the practitioners that offer VI Peel and companion VI Derm skincare, by providing new programs and educational tools. Khalil-Otto credits growth to internal changes, too. She hired an inspiring leadership team and implemented infrastructure and processes to support the workforce's expansion from four employees to 75. She has rolled out a social media strategy for connecting with consumers, a robust cloud-based technology stack, and a data-driven approach to business decision making.

The fruit of her labor of love, she says, is Vitality Institute's new headquarters, opening in 2024 with a showroom and event space. The brand will also launch a revamped consumer app and a handful of new products. Would her younger self be surprised by what she has built? Probably. But even 25-year-old Marya knew failure was never an option. "There was no giving up on the legacy of my dad," she explains. "Plus, the products are just too good."

→ **Vitality Institute leadership team from left to right: Orlando Flores, Dylan Otto, Marya Khalil-Otto, Mia Jenner, and Michael Elias**

PHOTOGRAPHY: JASMINE SORENSEN

VIPEEL.COM

CEO Survey

Every entrepreneur is different, but the CEOs of America's fastest-growing companies have a lot in common. You're bullish on A.I. You're wary of investment. And most of you have built more than one small business. Here's how you see the world in 2023. —*Graham Winfrey*

Abridged from the September 2023 Issue

WHO YOU ARE

23%

were born outside the United States.

GENDER

Male	Female
81%	19%

0% of respondents identified themselves as transgender or nonbinary.

AGE

≤24	0.2%
25-34	10%
35-44	37%
45-54	32%
55-64	17%
≥65	4%

MARITAL STATUS

Married	Single	Partnered
84%	6%	5%

4% of respondents reported being separated or divorced; 0% widowed.

WHO YOU ARE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 40

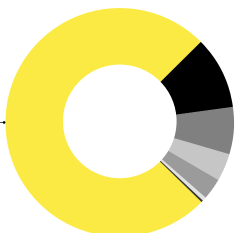
51% are serial entrepreneurs (and 49% still own at least one of their earlier companies).

55% started their first business with less than $10,000.

EDUCATION

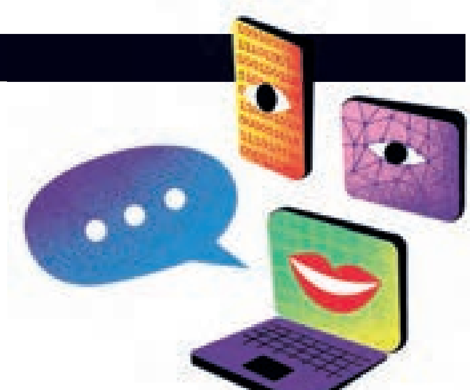
- ✓ SOME HIGH SCHOOL 1%
- ✓ HIGH SCHOOL 12%
- ✓ TWO-YEAR COLLEGE/ VOCATIONAL SCHOOL/ CODING ACADEMY 7%
- ✓ FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE 43%
- ✓ BUSINESS SCHOOL (MBA) 17%
- ✓ OTHER GRAD SCHOOL 21%

RACE/ETHNICITY



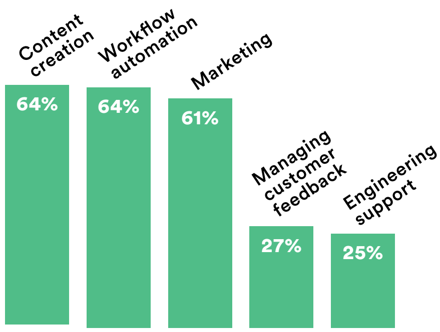
- 76% White or Caucasian
- 10% Asian or Asian American
- 7% Hispanic or Latino
- 4% Multiracial
- 3% Black or African American
- 0.5% American Indian or Alaska Native
- 0.2% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

A.I. AND SOCIAL MEDIA



84% use or plan to use artificial intelligence in their business.

THEIR TOP FIVE PURPOSES FOR A.I.



WHAT THEY EXPECT TO GET OUT OF A.I.

- ✱ "Responding to client questions quicker and more accurately."
- ✱ "Not exactly sure yet, but I know A.I. is the future."
- ✱ "Product design ideation."
- ✱ "Predictive analytics."
- ✱ "None of your business."

THEIR MOST IMPORTANT SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS FOR BUSINESS

LinkedIn	Facebook	Instagram	YouTube	Twitter	TikTok	None
57%	18%	12%	3%	1%	1%	6%

YOUR STRANGEST STRATEGIES

MOST UNUSUAL PRODUCTIVITY HACK

"Cold plunge!"

"Doing a quick meditation circle at a social area of our office. The meditation is called Fuck That."

"POLYPHASIC SLEEP."

WORST LIE THEY'VE TOLD TO HELP THEIR COMPANY SURVIVE OR GROW

"Telling a prospect that I was going to be in their town later that week and then booking a ticket after they said they were available. Turned into a good client."

"That we had software ready to deploy and it was not even in beta."

CRAZIEST TACTIC THEY'VE USED

"We didn't have money to pay for grocery store sales data. Let's just say, in the beginning I spent an inordinate amount of time in grocery stores."

"I joined a gym to get to know the community and built a clientele from that one source."

ILLUSTRATIONS BY GOLDEN COSMOS

FUNDING AND COMPENSATION

40%

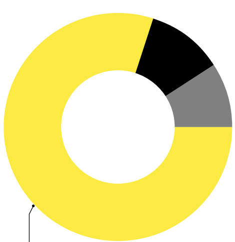
have turned down venture capital. Instead, to launch their companies, they tapped

- THEIR OWN SAVINGS **78%**
- CREDIT CARDS **26%**
- LOANS FROM FRIENDS AND FAMILY **24%**

77%

have never taken investment.

HOW INC. 5000 COMPANIES FUNDED THEIR GROWTH



80% Mostly internally (revenue)

11% 50-50 internally and externally

9% Mostly externally (loans, savings, or investment)

“**We constantly turn down VC money** as well as acquisitions. We’re a mission-driven company and we don’t want to lose sight or control of the work we do.”

$10,000,000

“We were offered $10 million with a 20% interest rate. We turned it down.”

ON PAYING THEMSELVES

Only 20% started paying themselves a salary upon starting their company.

40% started paying themselves within a year.

WHEN THEY *DID* START PAYING THEMSELVES, 45% TOOK A STARTING SALARY OF LESS THAN

$50K

THEIR TOP FIVE EXIT STRATEGIES ARE

1. SELL TO ANOTHER COMPANY **41%**
2. SELL TO INVESTORS OR FINANCIAL PARTNERS **18%**
3. HAVEN’T THOUGHT ABOUT AN EXIT **15%**
4. PASS TO FAMILY MEMBERS **9%**
5. SELL TO EMPLOYEES **8%**

“I’ve been told my company is worth $200M to $400M. **But if I sold it, I would be lost.** It gives me purpose and I love building it.”

WHAT INSPIRES YOU

WHY THEY BECAME ENTREPRENEURS

44%

had a great idea and believed they could make it happen.

32%

wanted to lead their own company.

14%

admired entrepreneurs and wanted to be like them.

4%

started their own business out of financial necessity.

4%

wanted to do good by starting a social venture.

1%

wanted to get rich.

Inc.5000
COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

Nº1958	287%	$286M+	386	ATAFreight
2023 Ranking	3-Year Growth	2022 Revenue	Employees	

An Early Innovator in Bringing Resilience to Supply Chain

ATA, a leading global logistics solutions provider, invests in innovative technology and around-the-clock service that has proved to be crucial to businesses.

Four years ago—before the pandemic, the Russian invasion, and trade bottlenecks in the Panama and Suez Canals—"supply chain" was rarely dinner-table conversation. But now, households everywhere understand the impact supply chain disruptions have on daily life.

For companies, increased volatility has given rise to innovative purchasing and procurement approaches, including "nearshoring" products so they are closer to the end customer and using data to improve supply chain management. These strategies build resiliency, another term we have been hearing often since 2020.

ATA (formerly known as ATA Freight Line), a boutique provider of full-suite logistics services, was an early adopter of what is now best practice, having invested in a digital-first approach to logistics and freight forwarding for more than a decade. Forward-thinking contributed to six consecutive years of 25 percent year-over-year revenue growth for the company and its first Inc. 5000 medallion.

Matt Goker, CEO, ATA

TECHNOLOGY AND TALENT THAT SUPPORTS LOGISTICS

ATA's proprietary supplier management platform provides real-time visibility and communication across the supply chain. The software uses artificial intelligence to track potential disruptions that could impact a shipment and automatically suggests responses. For example, if a vessel carrying cargo is behind schedule on day five of a 30-day journey, ATA technology might recommend a client procure a component from an alternative supplier to keep its production schedule on track. "We provide actionable intelligence to thousands of customers across the globe, and 90-plus percent report that they have achieved lower costs by working with us," says ATA CEO Matt Goker.

ATA combines its technology with human expertise, assigning clients a designated support person. "We call this the control tower. In some cases, these specialists are available 24/7," he explains. This approach enables ATA to oversee complicated logistics operations for enterprise companies in agriculture, construction machinery, automotive, oil and gas, nuclear power, consumer goods, as well as other industries. Goker says ATA's sophisticated services and abundant achievements would not be possible without its talented employees.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE AND THE UNEXPECTED

ATA employees appreciate the company's robust corporate social responsibility program, Goker says. Initiatives include planting a tree for every shipment (it has planted more than 250,000 as of September 2023), providing medical aid shipments to disaster areas, and using machine learning to design fuel efficient routes and minimize its carbon footprint. "Less carbon almost always translates into faster and more economic ways of transportation. That's the beauty in what we do," Goker says.

Next year, ATA plans to increase charitable giving, open new locations, and increase headcount by nine to 12 percent. If and when uncertainties arise, ATA will reframe challenges as a chance to advance its mission of enhancing lives. "For ATA, challenges almost always give rise to a new product, efficiency, or technology solution," Goker explains.

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