

 **EY Entrepreneur
Of The Year®**

Honoring the
ambitious
entrepreneurs
building a better
world for all



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Now in its 38th year, Entrepreneur Of The Year® is the ultimate global competition for transformative entrepreneurs and leaders of high-growth companies who are building a more equitable, sustainable and prosperous world. Throughout the program’s history, more than 11,000 entrepreneurs have been recognized across the US, and it has grown to celebrate business leaders in nearly 60 countries around the world.

This year we shine a spotlight on 39 outstanding Entrepreneur Of The Year Greater Los Angeles finalists across 27 companies, who were selected by an independent panel of judges based on their demonstration of long-term value through entrepreneurial spirit, purpose, growth and impact, among other core contributions and attributes. Each has demonstrated ambition and a passion for innovation as they reimagine their respective industries and reinvent our future economy.

Regional award winners will be announced on June 13, 2024, at The Beverly Hills Hotel. These winners will be considered for the National Entrepreneur Of The Year Awards, which will be presented in November at the annual Strategic Growth Forum®, the country’s

most prestigious gathering of CEOs, high-growth entrepreneurs, and C-suite executives representing global market leaders and professional investment fund managers. The overall National winner will then move on to represent the US at the World Entrepreneur Of The Year™ competition in June 2025.

The success of the program relies on the efforts of our independent panel of judges – Maureen Burgess, Jon Elliott, Lloyd Greif, Henry Hernandez, Ryan Iwamoto, Ariel Kaye, Nick Kim, Joanna McFarland, Ben Nazarian, Maria Salinas, Mark Stagen and Elise Wetzel. We also would like to thank this year’s sponsors. Our Presenting sponsors are PNC Bank, Cresa, Marsh, SAP America and the Kauffman Foundation. In Greater Los Angeles, our regional Platinum sponsor is Edelman; regional Gold sponsors include Cooley, Los Angeles Business Journal and Vaco; and regional Silver sponsors are ADP, Big Picture and Rutan & Tucker.

Congratulations again to our amazing finalists this year; we applaud your bold ambitions!

Sincerely,

**Bridget Ahern, Kim Harrington,
Rachel Russell and Teresa Michel
Ernst & Young LLP**

We present to you 39 bona fide trailblazers. Congratulations to this year’s remarkable and inspirational finalists, who were selected by an independent panel of judges based on their demonstration of long-term value through entrepreneurial spirit, purpose, growth and impact, among other core contributions and attributes. Each of these trailblazers is profiled in the following pages. Regional award winners will be announced at the event on June 13 at The Beverly Hills Hotel.

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ENTREPRENEUR OF THE YEAR®

2024

GREATER LOS ANGELES

FINALISTS



**EY Entrepreneur
Of The Year®**

2024 Award Finalist

LOS ANGELES

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ENTREPRENEUR OF THE YEAR® 2024 GREATER LOS ANGELES PROGRAM,
AND TO HAVE WILL FERRELL, LARRY FREEDMAN, AND BENNETT
ROSENTHAL REPRESENT US AMONG SO MANY OTHER AMBITIOUS BUSINESS
LEADERS IN LOS ANGELES.

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EY Entrepreneur
Of The Year®

2024 FINALISTS



SANFORD MANN
AMERICAN HARTFORD GOLD
Los Angeles

Sanford Mann, CEO of American Hartford Gold (AHG), has led the company to become the nation’s top retailer of gold and silver, delivering billions of dollars in precious metals. Mann’s professional journey began at Marcus & Millichap where he started as a senior associate. He then moved to Grubb & Ellis, taking on the role of senior vice president. These early roles in real estate and financial services helped him develop key skills in negotiation, strategic planning and leadership.

Transitioning into the precious metals industry, Mann worked with Goldline and then Merit Gold, which deepened his expertise in the precious metals market, contributing to his comprehensive understanding of industry dynamics and investment strategies. In 2015, he started AHG in a small, rented room with a handful of employees, which has today grown into three full office locations across the US with a work force of more than 200 people.

Mann has been instrumental in the company’s strategic vision and operational growth. Under his leadership, the company emphasizes ethical practices, customer education and transparent transactions. His approach to business is customer-centric, focusing on providing value and ensuring client satisfaction. This philosophy has been a key factor in AHG’s reputation and success in the precious metals market. Since its launch in 2015, American Hartford Gold has had an A+ rating with the Better Business Bureau and has been recognized (four-time winner) as an Inc. 5000 fastest-growing company. In his free time, Mann is very active in the community as he volunteers at several nonprofits, pursues an active lifestyle and sits on various boards.



AJ ABDALLAT
BEYOND LIMITS
Glendale

Led by founder and CEO AJ Abdallat, Beyond Limits is an industrial and enterprise-grade, hybrid artificial intelligence company built for the most demanding sectors, such as energy, utilities and health care. Beyond traditional artificial intelligence, Beyond Limits’ unique cognitive AI technology combines numeric techniques like machine learning with knowledge-based reasoning to produce actionable intelligence. Customers implement Beyond Limits AI to drastically boost operational insights, improve operating conditions, enhance performance at every level and ultimately increase profits.

Beyond Limits leverages a significant portfolio of advanced technology developed at Caltech for NASA space missions. Envisioning the challenge and promise of rocketry and space flight, Caltech formed the Guggenheim Aeronautical Laboratory, where Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) was started. In 2005, ambitious NASA projects necessitated the formation of JPL’s legendary AI Reasoning Laboratory, of which Beyond Limits is a by-product.

Beyond Limits’ solutions are pioneers of the hybrid model, which enhances advanced numerical analyses and machine learning techniques with cognitive AI. Cognitive AI replicates the neural processing of the human brain, which integrates a layer of tacit knowledge, the ability to make inferences from a given set of data, and apply human intuition. Data is often incomplete and messy, so cognitive reasoning is needed to fill in the gaps that machine learning analyses fail to override. The AI model of Beyond Limits originated from NASA operations that model hypothetical paths to predict the future and propose courses of action to make smart decisions, even under less-than-ideal data conditions. This approach has been essential to NASA’s exploration of the unknown in space, and Abdallat realized that this has great potential to solve problems for industries on earth.

Abdallat initially started Beyond Limits with a team of five in Glendale — which has now expanded to 300 people with offices in California, Hong Kong, Singapore, Tokyo, Taiwan, Jordan and Dubai.



**GREG LaVECCHIA and
MARI LLEWELLYN**
BLOOM NUTRITION
Venice

After hitting rock bottom mentally and physically in 2017, cofounder Mari Llewellyn turned to fitness to transform her life with the help of her now-husband, Greg LaVecchia. During her transformation journey, she struggled to find healthy supplements that were easy-to-use and delicious — and that’s why Bloom was born. Founded in 2019, Llewellyn and LaVecchia financed the entire first year on a credit card. Bloom is redefining the health and wellness space with easy-to-use supplements designed to help people bloom into their best selves.

Bloom is most known for its delicious Greens and Superfoods powder, a supplement that Llewellyn personally had been searching for. Made with more than 30 good-for-you ingredients to relieve bloat, support gut health and promote energy, it has gone viral on TikTok for its great-tasting, fruity flavors and benefit-driven formula. Greens along with the rest of the company’s line of wellness products, such as pre-workout, protein powders and collagen creamers, have experienced exponential growth. What began as a social-media-native brand has quickly become the No. 1 Greens brand in the US, and is now available at leading retailers nationwide, including Target, Walmart, Sam’s Club and GNC. As cofounder and president, Llewellyn is responsible for overseeing the brand vision, pushing the boundaries on creativity, fostering community, and product innovation. As CEO and cofounder, LaVecchia spearheads all marketing and growth, sales/retail operations, finance and product innovation. Together, they are a perfectly balanced powerhouse duo that unifies the Bloom team under a shared vision and empowers their employees to do things differently.



**DUSTIN SAKR,
MICHAEL SAKR and
OMAR SAKR**
**CIVIL CLOTHING/
DARC SPORT**
Torrance

Civil Clothing operates three distinct brands: Civil Regime, Darc Sport and CVLA. Led by the three Sakr brothers, Dustin, Michael and Omar, Civil sells direct to consumer and wholesale, as well as private label manufacturing. The three distinct brands have an extensive organic social following of more than 2.2 million highly engaged fans. The brands operate websites employing a “drop” based selling model. Civil drops can have in excess of 200,000 user sessions in a single day. Customers wait for the release of the products in high anticipation. Civil can sell through a majority of a drop in under 15 minutes and there now exists a resale market where the products can sell in excess of five times their original selling price.

The Sakrs believe in making products that are unique and cherished by their customers. Over time, they have been able to leverage their supply chain not only for their own direct products but also as a trusted partner for retailers like Fashion Nova, PacSun and Tilly’s. Civil has a unique IP of both design and manufacturing capabilities that make it a depended-upon and trusted vendor for these retailers. The product design, quality and timeliness make Civil one of the leaders in developing a distinct design style of product.

The growth at Civil was born in the Sakrs’ parents’ garage back in 2008. The brothers took risks to realize a vision of creating a brand with purpose and value, driven by the core message of being “the rose from concrete.” Along the way, the trio faced significant obstacles, but it was their courage, perseverance and resilience that propelled them forward. From those early days to where they are now, the Sakrs’ entrepreneurial spirit continues to guide them, inspiring them to keep pushing boundaries and making a positive impact on the world. They have built the business from the ground up, now employing more than 100 people at two office locations. With growth in every aspect of the business and multifaceted business model, the Sakrs have become a leader in their segment.



Congratulations **Larry Wu**

Founder & CEO, GigaCloud Technology

FINALIST

Entrepreneur Of The Year® 2024 Greater Los Angeles

Larry Wu's commitment to driving growth and fostering innovation has transformed GigaCloud Technology into a leading global B2B ecommerce marketplace.

His entrepreneurial spirit continues to drive the company's success, as we create a more sustainable, impactful and efficient global supply chain.

Join us in celebrating this notable achievement as testament to Larry's visionary leadership.



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JASMIN LARIAN HEKMAT

CULT GAIA
Los Angeles

Jasmin Larian Hekmat’s creative journey began in her early years, influenced by her upbringing. Raised by a sculptor and fashion designer mother, Hekmat was constantly immersed in inspiring textures and fabrics. Her father was the visionary mind behind the toy company MGA, well known for its beloved Bratz brand. This is where Hekmat had opportunities to hone her passion for fashion by designing clothing and developing creative concepts for the dolls. These

formative experiences nurtured her love for design, leading Hekmat to pursue further creative exploration at Otis College in Los Angeles and Manhattan’s Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT). While studying at FIT and cutting her teeth as an intern at Narciso Rodriguez and Jason Wu, Hekmat was first handmaking flower crowns for her close circle of friends. Her guiding design philosophy has always been to create things that she herself wants to wear. These crowns quickly took off as conversation starters and became widely popular. In 2012, Hekmat launched Cult Gaia, starting with accessories such as flower crowns and wired turbands made out of vintage fabric.

At its inception, the brand was a way for Hekmat to follow her passion for creating fun pieces for friends and family to celebrate occasions such as birthdays and other parties. Following the success of these pieces, the brand began expanding into additional categories.

Over the past decade, Cult Gaia has experienced remarkable growth, seamlessly expanding from its humble origins. What sets its journey apart is the unprecedented evolution from crafting delicate flower crowns to establishing itself as a revered lifestyle brand, igniting joy among its devoted, cultlike followers.

From Cult Gaia’s inception as a direct-to-consumer venture, Hekmat has transcended borders, now boasting flagship stores in major cities across the US and Europe. In 2023, the brand celebrated the openings of locations in New York City, East Hampton, Los Angeles and St. Barth’s, while also opening a captivating pop-up boutique in St. Tropez, with a new domestic location in Miami. Hekmat and her brand’s commitment to crafting authentic, on-brand creations and venturing into new product categories has solidified a loyal customer base and firmly entrenched Cult Gaia as a reputed name.



DAVID YEOM

EVITE
Glendale

Evite is the world’s leading digital platform for bringing people together to celebrate their most important life moments. With more than 120 million users, Evite has sent more than three billion event invitations in its history, enabling approximately three billion unique face-to-face connections across all types of gatherings. Through easy-to-use and modern digital invitations, text, email and shareable link delivery; a private message feed; gifting and donation

options; and inspiring party content, Evite provides hosts and guests with the creative and practical tools they want and need to make their get-togethers effortless and even more memorable.

Evite was originally founded in 1998, pioneering and enabling digital invitations to millions of Americans. David Yeom and George Ruan bought Evite from Liberty Media at the height of COVID-19 in 2020. Yeom and Ruan funded the purchase personally with their own at-risk capital. Yeom had capital from his years of working and investing in tech and a deep conviction that he could turn Evite into a special and highly profitable company. It took six months to buy the company. On Yeom’s 45th birthday, Sep 14, 2020, the deal was finalized. The very next day, he began a complete overhaul – the only things not changed were the name and the mission. The business model pivoted from ad sales to commerce; the experience was modernized; and, most importantly, Yeom focused on strengthening team culture. It has been less than four years since, and with Yeom as CEO, Evite has become a huge success story. Revenue has never been higher and the brand has never been more profitable.

Yeom and team took Evite from an unprofitable, outdated, ad-based business to a highly scalable and highly profitable commerce-based business that is cutting edge and modern.



DAVE KOPUSHYAN,
ARMAN OGANESSYAN,
BILL PHELPS,
GARY RUBENYAN and
TOMMY RUBENYAN

DAVE’S HOT CHICKEN
Pasadena

Innovation, risk-taking, and “insane luck” mark the ascent of Dave’s Hot Chicken, a modern-day American dream story. From the moment he tasted his first bite of the delicious Nashville-style hot chicken that childhood friends Dave Kopushyan, Arman Oganessian and Tommy Rubenyan created, Bill Phelps knew that he had come across something incredibly special. As a cofounder of Wetzel’s Pretzels and its former CEO of 26 years, Phelps immediately recognized the potential to create one of the country’s next big brands. Starting with just \$900 in 2017, Dave, Arman and Tommy opened Dave’s Hot Chicken in an East Hollywood parking lot under a pop-up tent with a portable fryer, some folding tables and an ice chest full of chicken tenders. Utilizing social media, they created an Instagram account and shared “food porn” style photos of their food, targeting local Los Angeles food bloggers. Arman’s social media prowess attracted Eater LA food blogger Farley Elliott, who posted an article entitled “Late Night Hot Chicken Stand Might Blow Your Mind.” The next day, the lines wrapped around the block – and they haven’t stopped since.

In January 2018, the group traded in their pop-up tent for a brick-and-mortar restaurant with support from Tommy’s older brother, Gary Rubenyan. In 2019, Phelps invested in the brand and cofounded Dave’s Hot Chicken Franchise Company, taking the role of CEO and spearheading the brand’s expansion.

Securing an initial investment from music industry icon Drake, when the brand had just one location, and leveraging his extensive network within the restaurant industry, Phelps engineered a framework backed by franchisees with the agility to open multiple locations across the US, Canada and the Middle East.

From a humble parking lot pop-up to hot chicken world leader, Dave’s Hot Chicken’s journey epitomizes the power of outstanding food coupled with visionary leadership, operational excellence and a commitment to authenticity.



BEN EACHUS

FLOWSPACE
Los Angeles

Ben Eachus founded Flowspace in response to the frustrations and challenges he faced managing logistics and fulfillment for an e-commerce brand, The Honest Company. There, Eachus was responsible for balancing inventory availability, storage and fulfillment for dozens of products, fulfilled through both in-store and online channels. The legacy logistics and fulfillment systems available at the time were not built for businesses selling directly to consumers.

Eachus had very little visibility into inventory allocation, and what data he did have wasn’t shared in real time, making it incredibly difficult to forecast and plan. He was certain there was a better way of doing things, and determined to build it.

In 2017, Eachus left The Honest Company to take a chance on his idea. His wife, Sarah, who was six months pregnant with their first child, signed up the first warehouse partners, and the Flowspace journey began. Believing so much in the idea, Eachus and his wife Airbnb’ed their condo and moved in with their in-laws to get the business off the ground.

Today, Eachus and Flowspace are on a mission to power global, independent e-commerce fulfillment. US e-commerce alone topped \$1trillion in spend last year, driven by accelerating consumer preferences for low-cost products, free shipping and efficient delivery. At the same time, brands are expanding their sales channels, striking up partnerships with retail stores and selling across online marketplaces and social commerce. Customers, no matter where they’re shopping, expect brand availability and a consistently excellent delivery experience. While consumer expectations have changed, legacy logistics operations have been slow to adapt, leaving brands and retailers to contend with systems and processes not built for the modern business. Eachus is working to change that, influencing Flowspace’s network of 150+ warehouse fulfillment center partners across the country to modernize their operations with Flowspace tech, enabling them to compete in the omnichannel era.

Bloom

#1 Greens Brand in the U.S.[‡]



“After I lost 90lbs and transformed my life through fitness, I was inspired to help others do the same. That’s why I created Bloom: high-quality, delicious health supplements to help you bloom into your best self.”

– Mari Llewellyn, Co-Founder of Bloom

 @bloomsupps  @bloomnu  bloomnu.com

[‡] Based on SPINS annual sales data in the U.S.





LARRY WU
GIGACLOUD TECHNOLOGY
El Monte

Larry Wu is the founder, chairman and chief executive officer at GigaCloud Technology, a pioneer of global end-to-end B2B e-commerce solutions for large parcel merchandise. GigaCloud Marketplace, the brand's B2B e-commerce platform, seamlessly integrates discovery, payments and logistics into a user-friendly interface. Connecting manufacturers primarily in Asia with resellers primarily in the US and Europe, GigaCloud's marketplace facilitates cross-border transactions with confidence, speed and efficiency. The comprehensive solution ensures nationwide delivery of products from the manufacturer's warehouse to the end customer's doorstep at a fixed price.

Starting his entrepreneurial journey in 2006, Wu founded Oriental Standard to manage outsourced software development and human resources functions for enterprises. However, 2008's global economic crisis resulted in the majority of his business being lost within months. Despite the setbacks, Wu stayed resilient and acknowledged the impact of uncontrollable factors and a need for a shift. He explored various business models and alignment with broader market trends and external factors. Wu's entrepreneurial spirit has driven him throughout his career; he is passionate about e-commerce and finding innovative, efficient and sustainable ways to solve complex industry challenges. Wu was the founding CEO of East Buy Holdings, a joint venture of Lenovo and New Oriental Educational & Technology Group following his MBA program at Yale.

By 2013, Wu had leveraged the latest e-commerce technologies to become the top seller of travel luggage in Japan. Inspired by the opportunity to remove inefficiencies between buyers and sellers worldwide, Wu pivoted the business to focus on B2B solutions and ultimately launched GigaCloud. Since then, Wu has relentlessly pursued expansion with the goal of solving his customers' most complex challenges — from optimizing GigaCloud's global supply chain solutions and leading the use of emerging technology, like advanced algorithms, to entering new markets. Growth required embracing risk, and in November 2023, the company acquired Noble House Home Furnishings, a B2B distributor of indoor and outdoor home furnishings. While GigaCloud absorbed product inventory and headcount from a struggling company, Wu saw the potential in Noble House and its benefits for the company, which now represents a critical milestone in GigaCloud's continued growth and expansion.



DARREN LITT
HIYA HEALTH
Los Angeles

Darren Litt started Hiya when his two daughters were young because he was frustrated by the lack of healthy options for his girls. As he reviewed labels across children's health products and spoke with experts, he became even more frustrated. Every kids' health product (vitamins, probiotics, etc.) seemed to have added sugar, "kid-friendly" dyes, extra plastic, gummy additives, ingredients outlawed in other countries and more. And just as confusing, most companies de-prioritized kids, instead focusing on adults, then adding a "kids" line almost as an afterthought.

Without experience in the industry, Litt set out to build a brand he wanted for his own daughters — he wanted to change the conversation around kids' health and create products he'd proudly give his own family. He obsessively started conceiving an elevated experience for Hiya's first product — a better-for-you multivitamin. And with that product, he asked experts countless questions. Why does a kids' vitamin include five grams of sugar? Why does it include gummy additives my kids associate with candy? Why does it include harmful dyes? Why do we throw away a plastic container every month? Why does the packaging look so dated? And so on.

After two years of research, Litt released Hiya, addressing all the core issues he'd uncovered. Unlike most kids' products, Hiya has no sugar, artificial dyes or gummy additives, arriving in an elegantly designed, refillable glass bottle with stickers, followed by monthly refills. Immediately it became clear Litt and Hiya had tapped into something big. Parents were impressed by the brand's transparency, honest ingredients and sustainable packaging, while kids loved decorating their bottles. Building on the initial success, Hiya has since released numerous products — always with an intense focus on doing the right thing for kids.

From 2022 to 2023, Hiya grew more than 200% and now has more than 200,000 active subscribers. While many wellness brands cut corners or see kids as an afterthought, Hiya puts kids first — which means premium ingredients, no junky additives and a monthly experience kids love. Hiya is now highly profitable with industry-leading unit economics, having bootstrapped the business without any meaningful outside investment.



DANIEL WINER
HEXCLAD
Los Angeles

Before HexClad, consumers had two primary choices for cookware: either the durability and cost of cast iron/stainless steel or the convenience, easy cleanup and affordability of nonstick. Cast iron/stainless steel can last a lifetime, but is heavy, costly and hard to clean. While nonstick provides an easy option for at-home chefs, it often needs replacement every 12 to 24 months. With Daniel Winer's vision, HexClad solved this, giving consumers a best-of-both-worlds option for the first time.

HexClad was cofounded in late 2016 by kitchen mavericks Winer (now serving as the brand's CEO) and Cole Mecray. They had years of experience in the industry and believed in a direct-to-consumer model. The early days required true entrepreneurial tenacity, grit and an unwillingness to fail. The duo drained their savings, stripped their retirement accounts, maxed out credit cards and applied for multiple small business loans. They assembled boxes in their backyard and then delivered them in their own cars. But it didn't take long for consumers to pay attention.

HexClad offers the durability of cast iron, the sear and performance of stainless steel, and the ease of nonstick. The brand has quickly become one of the fastest-growing cookware brands in the world today and one of the most successful direct-to-consumer companies in any category.

With Winer at the helm, HexClad has experienced meteoric 100% year-over-year growth. This success is a testament to its inspired direct-to-consumer model, creative content and genuine celebrity/influencer fandom, which has produced a groundswell of conversation and adoption among consumers. The unicorn venture has loyal customers in the US, Mexico, Canada, the UK, Japan, Australia and the EU. What started out as a seven-piece set has grown to a portfolio of 108 products with a mission to ultimately "own the kitchen." Since launch, Winer curated the HexClad Culinary Council, an esteemed team of globally celebrated Michelin-Star Chefs, including Gordon Ramsay (company partner), Nancy Silverton, Paul Ainsworth, Dominique Crenn, Clare Smyth and Natsuko Shoji, who authentically use the products in their restaurants and homes and participate in product development and testing, content creation and brand support.



CAMERON FUNK
INCHARGE ENERGY
Santa Monica

InCharge is a fully integrated provider of electric vehicle (EV) infrastructure solutions, including hardware, software, engineering, fleet and energy analysis, operations and maintenance support. The company offers its turnkey solution to original equipment manufacturer (OEM) auto, truck and bus manufacturers at the point of manufacture and goes to market via dealerships and end customers.

InCharge was founded to address the needs of scaling fleet electrification. Cameron Funk and his team created the intellectual property necessary to provide vertically integrated solutions and have numerous patents on software and hardware solutions to provide scalable reliable solutions to fleet customers. InCharge focuses on creating products that guarantee reliability and uptime for customers, including the proprietary InControl software platform. This platform provides insights into the vehicle's load management and connects to sensors on the EV charging equipment for maximum reliability. InControl has the ability to automatically create a service work order that can be remotely diagnosed via the InCharge Network Operations Center. InCharge has over 100 people on its Service Team, including electricians and EV technicians in the field performing repair work, campaign work and scheduled preventive maintenance.

Funk and the company's purpose is to "Bring the Power" to enable the conversion of fleet customers' fossil fuel vehicles to zero emission. InCharge is also dedicated to educating the future energy transition workforce, including programs tailored to traditional diesel and heavy duty mechanics and service techs. These programs retrain employees for the transition to new vehicles and new fueling methods, while enhancing old world labor resources with the ability to support customers with services necessary to maintain new technology.

InControl software is currently deployed on more than 12,000 ports, with many of the nation's largest fleet operators, including UPS, FedEx, Pepsi, Sysco, Starbucks, GM Cruise, Wayne, Motional and Ryder Truck. InCharge is now the fleet solution selected by seven out of 10 OEMs and three out of five major fleet customers in the US. Funk and his team took the risk to create these products before the market knew it needed them.

**CONGRATULATIONS
DUSTIN, MICHAEL, OMAR AND
THE SAKR FAMILY**

NFGU





CASSANDRA THURSWELL

KITSCH
Los Angeles

In 2010, Cassandra Thurswell bootstrapped Kitsch with her life savings. Without any industry experience, the 25-year-old entrepreneur handcrafted hair accessories, selling them door to door. There wasn't a calculated strategy except what she knew — make and sell. She managed every facet of her business, from product development to sales to customer service, driven by raw ambition and pure grit. Her blend of visionary thinking, listening to her customers' feedback and then taking

immediate action propelled Kitsch forward.

Kitsch's rise was not without hurdles. Thurswell stepped into a market monopolized by giants. Without the luxury of a marketing budget, a digital platform or buyer relationships, she had to get creative. Eschewing the typical routes of celebrity endorsements and media hype, she relied on the quality of her products, reorders and the loyalty of her customers to drive growth. Along the way, Thurswell's commitment to sustainability was unwavering. She revolutionized the beauty industry with her award-winning solid shampoo and conditioner bars, eliminating the need for plastic bottles, and partnered with 4Ocean to further combat plastic waste in our waterways.

Thurswell's innovations not only address environmental concerns but also demonstrate her belief in responsible entrepreneurship. Today, Kitsch is a global beauty phenomenon, transcending its beginnings to offer a comprehensive array of sustainable hair care products in more than 20,000 retailers internationally (including Target, Ulta, Nordstrom and Whole Foods), with a vibrant community of five million customers and enviable viral social media campaigns. Collaborations with iconic franchises like Barbie, Harry Potter and Disney underscore Thurswell's commitment to engaging with customers across all platforms, ensuring that Kitsch remains inclusive and attuned to the diverse needs and aspirations of its audience. Her story emphasizes the transformative power of hard work, passion and purpose, of loving your people and the planet.

In 2023, the brand achieved remarkable milestones — a triple digit increase in both its Amazon and DTC channels, and significant expansion of its omnichannel retail presence within the US and internationally. Kitsch is revolutionizing the \$99.53 billion hair care industry with its solid formulations — selling one bar every five seconds.



WILL FERRELL,
LARRY FREEDMAN
and BENNETT
ROSENTHAL

LAFC
Los Angeles

It may have seemed crazy to enter the crowded LA sports market, with two MLB, NBA, NHL and NFL teams, and the Galaxy

of MLS. Yet in 2014, following the shutdown of the second MLS franchise in the market, Chivas USA, LAFC founders, including Bennett Rosenthal and Will Ferrell, purchased MLS expansion rights in LA for \$110 million. MLS Commissioner Don Garber explained that "they're going to be operating in a market with another very successful team. They've got to find a way to create a new brand, a new identity — differentiate themselves on and off the field. That is going to be their challenge."

LAFC met that challenge, filling the void left by Chivas and establishing a club that evolved into one of the most respected in global football. Running commercial operations, current co-president Larry Freedman set out to emulate LA Tourism's vision that "Everyone is Welcome in LA."

LAFC was embraced by a multicultural/multiethnic fanbase, reflected in stadium sellouts, robust supporters, top selling merchandise and the highest valuation in MLS. Since inception, through innovation and commitment to its core values of integrity, extreme ownership and authenticity, LAFC climbed to the top of the sports world, rewriting history on the field as the winningest team in MLS since 2018. And what now seems like a natural place for a state-of-the-art stadium was a risk at the time, as the \$370 million BMO Stadium rose from the ashes of the Sports Arena, and now presents one of sports' greatest fan experiences and ranks among the world's top concert venues.

On the field, the team went from setting records for a first-year team to winning a championship within five years. Off the field, LAFC helped vault MLS to new heights, becoming the first MLS team to be valued at more than \$1 billion in 2023 by *Forbes*. In 2023, the Club continued to be an industry leader and earned recognition with a record-breaking stadium naming rights deal, a league high in partnership revenue and revenue that nearly tripled since opening BMO Stadium in 2018.



EVERETT SANDS

LENDISTRY
Los Angeles

In his years working for traditional banks, Everett Sands saw minority- and women-owned businesses fall through the cracks in the finance industry. Lendistry was formed to overcome these systemic problems and was growing steadily when the pandemic changed everything. Throughout 2021, Lendistry provided rapid relief to underserved communities, including Paycheck Protection Program loans. At the same time, Lendistry expanded its lending platform

to deploy grants, powering relief grant programs like the California COVID-19 Small Business Relief Program, the largest state relief grant program in the country. It has since completed 20 grant programs.

Sands grew up in Washington, DC, where his grandfather owned a tailoring shop in the 1930s with five different locations. The business was doing well, but when his grandfather needed resources to reach the next level, he was given bad financial and tax advice and he couldn't access capital to grow further. The business didn't close entirely, but it took a hit. Sands grew up working at the shop, wondering, what if his grandfather had been able to get capital back then, like Sam Walton (of Walmart) did? These questions inspired Sands to change the game for the business owners who still face a similar landscape today.

The mission and strategy at Lendistry are formed with business owners like Sands' grandfather always in mind. Sands and his family faced great personal and financial risk to found Lendistry. He left a job in the Consumer Lending Division at Wells Fargo, where his team ranked in the bank's top 2%. His twin daughters were six years old. In a time when most people would have stuck with their stable position, Sands and his wife decided to become trailblazers in an archaic industry. As a young Black man, breaking new ground in an industry that is slow to change was a very risky venture. In 2023, Lendistry became the No. 1 African American-led SBA lender.

Sands' vision is to disrupt predatory lending in undercapitalized communities while maintaining responsible practices that are fair for all. The more businesses receive loans and make their payments, the more the perception of risk can be lifted for future generations of entrepreneurs.



KATLYN GAO

LOVB
Hermosa Beach

LOVB was cofounded in 2020 by Katlyn Gao, Kevin Wong and Peter Hirschmann. Applying Gao's deep brand and consumer business background, Wong's volleyball heritage and Hirschmann's entrepreneurship, LOVB quickly made its mark, building the largest club volleyball business in under four years, and attracting more than \$60 million in investment. Despite its auspicious start, LOVB met naysayers who couldn't understand why you would

build a club business first and then a league. Leagues traditionally launch from the top down, and LOVB's approach was exactly the opposite: building a first-of-its-kind, youth-to-pro volleyball league.

Taking a page from her management roles at Lululemon, Sephora and Coach, and her strategic expertise from Bain, Harvard Business School and more, Gao knew to build a league from scratch that could also be commercially sustainable, LOVB needed to grow the fan base through the community. Employing a lifetime value model to fandom — a concept normally reserved for consumer goods companies — Gao's strategy centered on being community first, and cultivating a deep, multifaceted relationship with fans by making them integral stakeholders who benefit as much as the pros, building fans for life.

Rather than rushing to market like others, LOVB began by methodically building its volleyball business, with 1,200+ junior club teams across 22 states and growing. From its foundation of junior clubs that boast the attractive Gen Z demographic, the league identified strategic markets to tie its pro teams to its clubs, creating an ecosystem of fandom from the ground up, and for the first time, a real pathway for youth to play professionally in the US. Through this industry-first, community-up model, LOVB has brought hundreds of thousands of people into its ecosystem, even prior to its pro launch, which will happen later this year.

By applying her deep expertise, Gao has built a model that is not only commercially viable, but has been built for growth from year one. With her deliberate and strategic approach, she has attracted some of the biggest investors and icons across sport, entertainment and business, who believe LOVB is setting the standard for how leagues can and should be built.

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Hiya proudly congratulates our visionary founder and dad, Darren Litt, on being a finalist for the prestigious Entrepreneur Of The Year® award.

Thank you, Darren, for your unwavering commitment to kid's health.

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2024 FINALISTS



PETER FISHER and
ALEXANDER ISRAEL

METROPOLIS
Los Angeles

In 2017, Alexander Israel and his cofounder Peter Fisher built Metropolis to transform parking and create a platform that would ultimately convert parking assets into mobility hubs. It uses computer vision to deliver a “checkout-free” experience where

users simply drive in and drive out. Metropolis is making parking more efficient, adaptive and intelligent, in turn driving positive financial performance for itself and its real estate partners.

The decision to start with parking resulted from two criteria: one, an antiquated problem that would provide Metropolis with extensive, proprietary experience deploying the platform in real-world environments, and two, a ubiquitous problem that affects everyone. Metropolis developed Orion as its proprietary vision technology that uses customized hardware with software developed in house. Orion captures images of vehicles and extracts their license plate and vehicle information. It is trained on a comprehensive and proprietary data set to recognize vehicles, vehicle characteristics and license plates. After visitors sign up for Metropolis, they can go to any garage that uses its technology and drive in and drive out as they are recognized automatically and receive text updates with pricing information and receipts upon exit.

To scale the technology, Metropolis first acquired Premier Parking, one of its early adopters and a significant operator in the US. This acquisition of Premier Parking in 2022 proved successful in creating meaningful value through transactions for the business. Metropolis announced its acquisition of SP Plus in the fall of 2023, combining operational excellence and artificial intelligence to deliver remarkable experiences for the largest parking network across North America. Integration of legacy companies is never easy, and it’s an ambitious endeavor to take on the task of transforming parking. Metropolis was built to act with conviction and take big bets to deliver remarkable payment experiences to its customers.

Israel and Fisher are leading Metropolis ahead with an acquisition-forward, go-to-market strategy to pursue growth opportunities.



PARKER MORSE

MY CODE
Santa Monica

In 2015, Parker Morse founded My Code (originally H Code) as a solution for brands and advertisers looking to reach Hispanic audiences with authenticity. With Morse’s expertise in leading product development and revenue growth, he sought out to create one of the first media companies specializing in marketing to Hispanic consumers at scale. The idea behind My Code was inspired by Morse’s wife, who is Hispanic, as Morse witnessed some of the stereotypes

and lack of representation she experienced in the media. She often communicated to Morse that advertisements geared toward “Hispanic audiences” fell flat and she didn’t feel she could identify with the content.

Inspired to make a difference, Morse started the business as a Hispanic ad network, signing clients one by one and traveling to Latin America to educate partners on what the company could deliver. Morse recalls working with a small but mighty team that was passionate about the work it was doing and was set on making a difference in the way underrepresented communities were portrayed. Many of those team members are still part of My Code today and Morse vividly remembers the humble beginnings and small wins that would soon lead to being one of the leading multicultural marketing and media experts in the ecosystem.

My Code houses a deep collection of trusted consumer media brands, from 110-year-old *El Diario*, the US’ oldest Spanish-language newspaper, to Remezcla, the most influential media brand for the Latino community, in addition to several CTV channels that offer diverse-focused film and television and a network of 1,100+ publishers and exclusive media partnerships.

Over the past three years, My Code rebranded and saw a new era as it added media, original content and creative services to its offerings. My Code’s products also include divisions dedicated to reaching Black, AANHPI and LGBTQ+ audiences as the demand for honest and innovative storytelling increases. My Code is now so much more than the ad network it began as nearly a decade ago. It has evolved to become a modern media company that provides clients with unparalleled access, creativity and scale when it comes to marketing to diverse consumers.



GENE SHERIDAN
NAVITAS SEMICONDUCTOR
Torrance

Gene Sheridan created Navitas Semiconductor with his cofounder and COO/CTO, Dan Kinzer, in 2014. The duo shares a strong belief in sustainability, clean energy and the importance of transitioning our planet from fossil fuels to an electrified economy. They started Navitas with a focus on next-gen power semiconductors that can accelerate that vision.

When Sheridan and Kinzer started Navitas, they had nothing. They found a small venture capital fund, MalibuQ, that agreed to give them initial funding to get the company started. They had no team, technology or business plan. They identified some gallium nitride (GaN) technology at Hughes Research Labs and negotiated a license to use that technology. It all started in a small, 500 square foot trailer in the parking lot. The duo convinced some prior engineers with whom they had worked at International Rectifier to join them. It took two years to build a small team, build prototypes and file their core patents.

GaN is a new, advanced material that can replace silicon to make energy-efficient power semiconductors. At the time, others had tried to turn this material into commercial devices, but no one had made any success out of GaN. By 2017 Sheridan and team had the GaN power devices working, and in 2018 they released their first products to the market and received global attention in the power industry. In late 2018, Navitas landed its first major customer, Anker Electronics. Anker makes mobile aftermarket chargers and it introduced the first GaN-based chargers, which can charge a phone, tablet or laptop up to three times faster than traditional silicon-based chargers. In 2019 revenue began increasing, and within the next 24 months, Navitas had become the first company to commercialize GaN for the power semiconductor industry. The company has since captured virtually all mobile suppliers to use its tech, including Apple, Samsung, Dell, HP, LG, Xiaomi, Oppo, Moto and Lenovo.

With its mission to “electrify our world,” Navitas is tackling one of the greatest challenges of mankind and our planet.



MELISSA PALMER
OSEA MALIBU
Malibu

OSEA was born from generations of women inspired by the sea and the healing power it holds. Melissa Palmer’s mom, Jenefer, began formulating products as spa director at Murrieta Hot Springs in 1986 when she couldn’t find products that met her high standards. OSEA officially launched in 1996 at Fred Segal. OSEA’s commitment to quality, efficacy, safety, sustainability and innovation has remained unwavering throughout its almost 30-year history.

With a product line that includes timeless classics like Undaria Algae Body Oil and innovative developments like Vagus Nerve Oil, OSEA continues to push the boundaries of wellness while staying true to its roots. Palmer’s relentless pursuit of excellence and her dedication to fostering a culture of kindness within the company have propelled OSEA to the forefront of the clean beauty movement that the company helped to inspire. For Palmer, rejoining OSEA in 2016 as cofounder and the first CEO posed a significant challenge. At the time, the company had very little revenue, which made it difficult to quickly scale the business without outside investment. She bootstrapped and used social media strategies to build OSEA into the success that it is today.

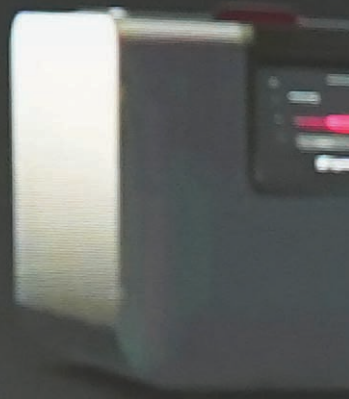
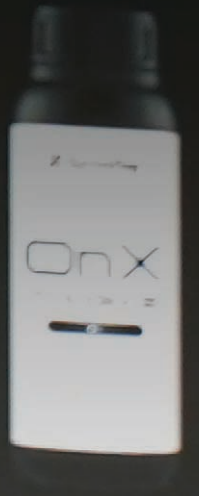
Palmer’s innovation strategy is rooted in her commitment to creating products that are good for people and the planet. She has inspired a deep commitment to sustainability in OSEA, from sourcing responsibly harvested seaweed to implementing and improving packaging solutions. OSEA embodies its vision of creating waves of kindness for people and the planet by remaining true to its integrity and mission.

One way Palmer has led OSEA to innovate is through the expansion of body care products. With the brand’s bestselling Undaria Algae Body Oil as the catalyst, OSEA has built a portfolio of award-winning body care and wellness products that focus on whole body wellbeing. Palmer took a big risk when she decided to resist the temptation to fuel growth through traditional fundraising and instead remained family-owned and operated. She was guided by her intuition and scaled the company intentionally, unlike many of her competitors. As a result, she has maintained control of the company and can determine its future.



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Amir Mansouri

Entrepreneur Of The Year® 2024 Greater Los Angeles Finalist



JAY ACKERMAN
REVELEER
Glendale

Jay Ackerman joined Health Data Vision (now Reveleer) as CEO in 2016, taking over for a founder who launched the company in 2012. Leadership had shared a vision of building a SaaS solution to automate the highly manual process of annual quality reporting for health plans, but it struggled to grow. Investor Upfront Ventures saw the opportunity and sought an experienced leader to transition the company from a tech-enabled services provider to a

SaaS-based platform.

Ackerman moved immediately to re-envision the product roadmap, rightsize costs, raise capital and pursue early adopters. The journey was challenging, requiring personal and financial sacrifices. He prioritized re-architecting the software platform into a cloud-native, scalable solution that supported market growth and rapid innovation. He then rebranded the company, shifting its focus to a software-led model. Since then, Reveleer has grown exponentially, created meaningful business outcomes and built a collaborative culture upon making every moment matter, putting customers first and fostering community. Reveleer’s solution empowers health plans to gain control over commercial and government programs in risk adjustment, quality improvement and member management.

Building on initial successes, Ackerman secured numerous financing streams to support growth and investor success, while ensuring financial discipline, including a substantial investment raise in late 2021 with leading health care investor Oak HC/ FT, and most recently a \$65 million debt financing led by Hercules Capital. Today, Reveleer is revolutionizing value-based care with the only end-to-end, cloud-based, artificial intelligence (AI) driven solution to transform member data into clinical insights that improve care.

Ackerman’s enthusiasm for Reveleer is rooted in his belief that value-based care is the best path to improving individual health and reducing the cost of care in the US. Fundamental to the company’s mission is enabling risk-bearing organizations to improve their visibility into their members’ health, take action to improve the quality of care, and ensure medical claims and data reflect actual care given. The company continues to aggressively add new capabilities, explicitly focusing on AI.



AMIR MANSOURI
SPINTRAY
Los Angeles

SprintRay is a leading provider of user-friendly and cutting-edge solutions for digital dentistry, offering a comprehensive range of 3D printers, post-processing ecosystems, advanced AI-powered software and innovative materials.

The company originated during Amir Mansouri’s doctoral program in engineering at USC, where he and three colleagues harnessed their expertise to craft an innovative 3D printer.

Mansouri’s transformative leadership for SprintRay showcases an unwavering commitment to innovative opportunities, reshaping the dental industry on a global scale. Pioneering 3D printing for dentistry, Mansouri’s visionary approach created a new category in a field where 3D printing was previously nonexistent. After identifying this gap, SprintRay developed the hardware, workflows and materials to enable 3D printing of oral prosthetics chair side, such as crowns, night guards and surgical guides, 100 times more efficiently than traditional methods.

Mansouri’s pursuit of affordable dental care involved substantial risk-taking, evidenced by a bold 18% investment in research and development. The decision to focus exclusively on dentistry before widespread 3D printing adoption was a significant gamble. Launching a 3D printer into the dental industry demanded convincing skeptical professionals. Despite initial hesitations, SprintRay emerged as a market leader, surpassing competitors’ combined market share — an outcome that reflects the company’s courage and perseverance. SprintRay’s journey encountered challenges, from fundraising for sustained growth to acquiring proficiencies in clinical dentistry — as an engineer, Mansouri had no experience in the dental profession. The transition from an engineering career to entrepreneurship was a personal risk, potentially jeopardizing Mansouri’s return to a traditional engineering position. SprintRay’s success story is a testament to perseverance, innovative thinking and its commitment to pushing the boundaries of 3D printing technology.

Overcoming skepticism and opposition while winning over the industry’s key opinion leaders, the company expanded its footprint from Los Angeles across the US and Canada and to Europe, the Middle East and Asia in a remarkably short span. The addition of materials (resins) production underscores SprintRay’s adaptability and ability to thrive amid adversity.



**JOHN KEATLEY and
CALEB MORSE**
SCRATCH FINANCIAL
Pasadena

In 2015 Caleb Morse and his future wife, Jaime, were living in an apartment in Santa Monica. They awoke to the sounds of a crying cat coming from the alley behind the complex. They discovered her, injured and abandoned in a dumpster.

The pair rushed to the emergency pet hospital and soon discovered that it would cost \$4,500 to save the cat. This traumatic experience was top of mind when Morse and John Keatley connected later that year to discuss ideas for a new company. Keatley had recently returned from Sweden after serving as CFO of Klarna, the buy now pay later (BNPL) pioneer. They recognized that a new type of credit offering, built upon BNPL foundations, could help pet owners and veterinarians alike by offering the flexibility to spread their payments over time.

Keatley and Morse wore many hats in the early days as they built an innovative offering in a highly regulated industry. Gaining approval to offer a consumer lending product proved to be an especially difficult task; Morse was a regular at the California Department of Financial Institutions as he secured the necessary license. The two took no salary for more than a year, tapping into their savings to fund the build, marketing and even the first loans. Within 12 months of launch, they made significant progress; by year-end, 500 practices were offering Scratch Pay. Early pet owners were impressed by the simplicity of the application and loan acceptance process, and practices loved offering the product to their clients without involvement from their staff or additional hardware in the practice.

Working as complements to one another, Morse’s obsessive focus on building exceptional products to meet customer needs and Keatley’s steady but opportunistic approach to funding innovation have resulted in the company deploying cash effectively. Today, Scratch Pay is offered in nearly half of all US and Canadian veterinary hospitals. The company also offers Scratch Checkout, a cloud-based, point-of-sale solution that simplifies payment capture whether in person or remote, immediate or deferred. Scratch’s products collectively facilitate more than 10% of all US veterinary consumer transactions.



LOREN CASTLE
SWEET LOREN’S
Los Angeles

Loren Castle grew up in a family of entrepreneurs in New York City. Castle, a former yoga instructor, was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s lymphoma in her early twenties. After overcoming cancer, she decided to cut out most dairy, artificial and highly processed ingredients from her diet as the impact of whole, real food was crucial to her health. A former employee of the original Levain Bakery, Castle has a major sweet tooth and love for a warm cookie. She couldn’t find

any recipes made with whole, clean ingredients that also satisfied her sweet tooth, so she began making her own.

After learning she was cancer free in 2007, 22-year-old Castle set out to turn her at-home, better-for-you cookie dough recipes into a business. Influenced by her upbringing, she leaned into the entrepreneurial spirit gleaned from her parents and signed up for a business writing course to create a plan for what would become Sweet Loren’s. Armed with a mission for her brand and a relentlessly tested cookie dough recipe, she cold-pitched the head buyer at her local Whole Foods Market following an introduction from a classmate. Moved by her determination to start a better-for-you food business and impressed by the delicious product, he was sold. He recognized a gap in the market for innovative natural cookie dough and Sweet Loren’s subsequently entered its first retail location.

Castle entirely bootstrapped the business, and began by doing everything herself, including baking in her tiny NYC studio with a toaster oven, raising her bed to store the bulk ingredients underneath, traveling with a toaster oven on the subway to demo the product in stores and being as scrappy as possible. When she landed national distribution in Publix, she realized she needed a team to sustain the growth the brand was experiencing. Castle raised some money from friends, family and an angel investor. Focused on profitability from day one, Castle and her team built a profitable, self-sustainable business without seeking any outside funding.

Guided by Castle’s leadership, Sweet Loren’s has risen to become the No. 1 natural cookie dough brand in the US and the only major brand driving both dollar sales and units in the category.

ADDICTIVELY
delicious
COOKIE DOUGH
WITH INGREDIENTS
everyone
CAN ENJOY



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ANDREW BLACKMON
THE BLACK TUX
Gardena

The Black Tux was born out of an idea cofounders Andrew Blackmon and Patrick Coyne had after their poor experience with renting tuxedos for Blackmon’s wedding. Like so many grooms before him, Blackmon was left wearing an ill-fitting, cheaply made, worn-out tuxedo on the biggest day of his life. The industry was ripe for disruption, and The Black Tux was ready to become the category leader in formalwear.

When building The Black Tux, it was critical to Blackmon to only partner with top suiting manufacturers to ensure the best quality and fit. Since inception, the company’s tuxedos and suits are the quality equivalent of a \$1,200+ garment in a retail store. While incumbents in the space and competitors today still make ill-fitting polyester blend suits, The Black Tux has never strayed from delivering high-quality products with outstanding aesthetics.

The Black Tux was built with the purpose to give people confidence for life’s most important moments: not just to dress people, but dress them to own the moment. Blackmon planned to achieve this by focusing on elevated experience, perfect fit and accessible style. Renting from The Black Tux is simple — a customer can visit a showroom for a tailored experience, or use the online fit tool and style guidance for a totally virtual experience. No matter how customers place their order, they’re receiving a 100% merino wool suit, 100% cotton shirt and real leather shoes in modern styles. Blackmon put everything into launching and building The Black Tux. Once the company went live, every single customer phone call went directly to his personal cell phone. Ten years later, he’s still sending handwritten notes and text messages to customers because he cares deeply about every single customer’s experience. Today, The Black Tux has four showrooms, two warehouses and more than 300 employees.



AMY LIU
TOWER 28 BEAUTY
Los Angeles

For more than 15 years, Amy Liu worked as a beauty executive at some of the fastest-growing prestige companies, including Smashbox, Kate Somerville and Josie Maran Cosmetics. But as a longtime eczema sufferer, Liu couldn’t even enjoy the best part of working in the beauty industry: trying out all the products! Even the clean alternatives were super expensive or too clinical, as though they were coming straight from the doctor’s office. Liu saw this space as an opportunity, and launched Tower 28 in 2019 as a beauty company inclusive of all skin tones, skin types, budgets and beauty philosophies.

With the message that #ItsOkayToBeSensitive, Tower 28 is the first and only beauty brand to follow the National Eczema Association’s Ingredient Guidelines. The skin-friendly products are 100% clean, vegan and free of every known skin irritant. Everything is rigorously dermatologist and allergy tested (formulas adhere strictly to the National Eczema Association’s ingredient guidelines).

Since launching in 2019, Tower 28 has quickly become a leader in the clean beauty category. Customers, tastemakers, celebrities and the press have all flocked to its innovative products. Tower 28 found a supportive retail partner in Sephora early on, and since launching has grown its successful partnership to become one of the top performing clean beauty brands carried by the iconic retailer.

Liu’s first three employees, who joined Tower 28 as their first jobs out of college, are all still with the team. She’s created a hub of innovation where everyone’s ideas are valued and each employee gets equity on day one. In doing so, she has fostered a team that’s eager to grow alongside the young brand. Tower 28 now has 27 full-time employees, 10 of whom are women, and three-quarters of whom identify as a person of color. In terms of growth, Tower 28 has more than doubled its sales year over year every year since the brand launched in 2019, it has substantial shelf space in every Sephora nationwide (in addition to successful partnerships with other retailers, including Credo Beauty, goop and Revolve), and its ShineOn Lip Jelly is the No. 1 best-selling clean lip gloss at Sephora.



**MATTHEW JOHNSON
and NATHAN
JOHNSON**
TRUCONNECT
Los Angeles

In 2006, brothers Matthew and Nathan Johnson acquired Telscape Communications, the predecessor company to TruConnect, with the goal to expand low-income wireline and wireless service beyond California. At that time, the fastest-growing segment of the US population was the low-income category with expanding reliance on food stamps and Medicaid. After 2008’s recession, this unfortunate trend only accelerated, as did the need for subsidized wireline and wireless services in the US. The Johnsons saw how this created a barrier for 51 million Americans when accessing essential needs like health care, education and employment. Through a shared entrepreneurial spirit and an eye for innovative solutions, the two set out to provide digital connectivity to those in need.

To bring TruConnect to life, the brothers identified government funding initiatives to support what would become the business’s discounted pricing model and personally invested. Since its inception, the two have continued to reinvest in the company to drive growth. TruConnect has overcome numerous hurdles throughout its 20 years due to changing governmental programs and the overly burdensome regulatory market in which it operates. Further, faced with 2009’s economic downturn and evolving consumer needs, the business pivoted to include a full range of wireless service offerings to reinforce TruConnect’s stability. The company continues to successfully navigate these challenges, which speaks to the brothers’ shared ability to creatively restructure revenue strategies and maintain a relentless focus on making the company successful.

Since 2006, the Johnsons have expanded TruConnect beyond California to what is now the third-largest lifeline wireless provider nationwide. TruConnect finished 2023 helping more than 1.2 million customers get connected.

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CONGRATULATIONS
PARKER MORSE

Congratulations to Parker Morse,
Founder and CEO of My Code,
on being named a Finalist for
Entrepreneur Of The Year® award

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first approach to marketing, and creating
a future for media and advertising where
everyone is authentically represented

MEZCLA
MEDIA GROUP X H | CODE
HISPANIC

B | CODE
BLACK

A | CODE
AANHPI

PRIDE | CODE
LGBTQIA+



Congratulations to our CEO
and Co-Founder Katlyn Gao
and all of the finalists for being recognized
for your game-changing contributions.

With LOVB,

LEAGUE
ONE
VOLLEYBALL

LOVB