

Person of the Year
KEVIN LYONS-TARR, 4IMPRINT

When you call 4imprint's (*asi/197045*) toll-free number, the first voice you hear belongs to one of the company's real characters – the guy who tends to take on a lot of the odd jobs. Like when there was a major flood in Oshkosh, WI, in 2008, he helped mop up 4imprint's wet floor. When the fast-growing company has run out of desk space over the years, he's chipped in to build new cubicles. He's also sort of the unofficial greeter for new employees, giving out his personal cell phone number. "He doesn't take himself too seriously," says Mary Curtin, a longtime 4imprint employee.

This is also the guy who has elevated 4imprint from a catalog-first marketer to the first page of the top search engines on the Web. He's a metrics man, a spokesperson, a techie, a deal-maker, a master marketer. And now, Kevin Lyons-Tarr, 4imprint's president and the guy in charge of the largest e-commerce operation in the industry, is *Counselor's* Person of the Year.

The driving force for 4imprint is the clear sales and marketing strategy that Lyons-Tarr has implemented. With no employee or independent reps, 4imprint puts a premium on trackable and measurable direct marketing techniques including e-mail, search, paper-click, product sample packages and e-commerce. "Kevin's done a great job of setting the tone," says Greg Ebel, 4imprint's vice president of sales and marketing. "For us, it's about having a maniacal focus and doing what we're good at. It's also about hanging out where customers are."

Customers, of course, are hanging out on the Internet.



Kevin Lyons-Tarr

Consider that online sales in the U.S. have risen nearly 300% in the last decade, boosted by 80 million home and business broadband connections. It's estimated by researchers that 10% of all U.S. retail sales will be Web-based by 2016. "E-commerce is so powerful that no one in business can afford to avoid it," says Jack Plunkett, CEO of Plunkett Research. "The challenge for businesses is not just making the initial investment, but committing to keeping it up."

It's a challenge Lyons-Tarr – who has an IT background – and his staff have met. For example, when an Internet browser searches for "promotional products" through Google, 4imprint consistently comes up near the top of the result listings, and some days, the distributor ranks first. How many potential customers does that help 4imprint reach in one month? Based on independent searches, roughly 368,000, according to Google Analytics. "If you're not on the first page of Google, you really don't exist," says Nate Tennant, president of SEO firm Kirk Communications.

So what's 4imprint's search engine secret? "We look at what works and what doesn't," Lyons-Tarr says. SEO experts, like Tennant, point out a few specifics after looking at 4imprint's website. "They have



Garry Hurvitz

a really tight, clean URL structure, and it's been well-thought-out," he says. "Products are listed on top in navigation, on the left side and in the middle of the site. That gets keywords in more places." Then there's the front-page introductory video, featuring Lyons-Tarr. "Video is key for SEO. The number-two search engine in the world is YouTube."

While it would be an exaggeration to say all of 4imprint's recent gains (in the past two years alone, 4imprint's sales have grown 36% to reach \$225 million) have come through a strong SEO and e-commerce link, Lyons-Tarr does admit his firm's Web-based sales have increased by double digits over the last several years. He also agrees with the notion that industry sales through traditional channels have plateaued, and real growth must be earned in other ways. "As technology changes, it's been important for us to be more flexible," he says. "Increasingly, the world is moving toward an Internet-enabled way of doing business. We're well-positioned to take advantage of the shift."

And, suppliers have also noticed how well-equipped 4imprint is to capitalize on current and future trends. "They have a formula and they've been consistent," says Jeff Brown, chief marketing

officer at Polyconcept North America. "They build trust and operate very openly."

Since Lyons-Tarr became chief executive at 4imprint eight years ago, the company's annual sales have risen by at least 12% six different times. In two of those years, revenues jumped more than 30%. Predictably, only in 2009 – during the worst recession in the U.S. in 80 years – did sales slip at all. At the end of that year, 4imprint couldn't award profit-sharing bonuses to its employees. Instead the company gave out \$20 gift cards, seemingly an afterthought until employees began noticing that Lyons-Tarr had also hand-written personal notes to all of them. "We had over 400 employees," says Curtin, 4imprint's vice president of human resources. "We follow the Golden Rule here, and Kevin leads by example."

International Person of the Year
GARRY HURVITZ, ASH CITY WORLDWIDE

When Garry Hurvitz – president/CEO of Toronto-based *Counselor* Top 40 supplier Ash City Worldwide (*asi/37143*) – makes pronouncements about market forces aligning overseas that will impact the industry, clients and competitors alike take notice.

Spending more than 14 weeks out of the year in places like Cambodia, Thailand, Bangladesh, Laos, China, Vietnam, Africa and Japan, Hurvitz is an avid believer in actually visiting the places where his company does business and thoroughly immersing himself in the cultures. Hurvitz is nothing if not an "all-in" kind of entrepreneur.

Hurvitz's story begins when he left school at the tender age of 12 to chase his passion as a drum-

mer in a band. Quickly realizing the need for income, Hurvitz started selling imprinted T-shirts on the carnival circuit at 14, and then he opened the initial incarnation of his company – then called GH Enterprises – when he was 16, which led to selling "tens of thousands" of T-shirts to rock bands like Led Zeppelin and The Rolling Stones. A complete neophyte in the arena of international business, Hurvitz started importing from China when he was 17, and a year later, made his first trip to Asia. Now 57, he's on the road a quarter of the year on behalf of his company, which he has self-financed since 1993. "From the ages of 15 to 30, I didn't take a deep breath ... I was too driven," Hurvitz says. "Now, if I don't have fun doing what I'm doing, then I'm not doing it."

Deciding to enter this industry fully in 1988, Hurvitz and his team started with five shirt styles and came up with the color "Ash" for all of them, because they didn't want to carry too many hues in case the business didn't take off. He needn't have worried. "We were having explosive growth of \$25 million per year – I didn't anticipate that," Hurvitz recalls. "We were strictly in polos, T-shirts and jerseys. In the fall of 1998, I got on a plane to Korea with \$30 million cash in my bag and bought \$30 million worth of jackets at cost. I had inventory on the shelf nine months later."

Now, Ash City is one of the largest suppliers in the market, with more than \$135 million in annual North American sales. Jonathan Isaacson, owner of *Counselor* Top 40 supplier Gemline (*asi/56070*) and *Counselor's* International Person of the Year in 2008, says that Hurvitz "is one of the best in the industry" when it comes to overseas sourcing and product development. "Garry brings a very deep personal knowledge base and has spent as much time in the field as almost anybody I know,"

says Isaacson. "He cares deeply about the product and what he is building."

So, what are Hurvitz's predictions, based on the international trends he sees firsthand and studies so closely, for the industry in the next few months? "Cotton right now is trading at 90 cents, down from \$2.37," he says. "Do I see a drastic decrease in prices going forward? No. The cost of producing the cotton has gone up in leaps and bounds. China's becoming so expensive, with labor costs and the RMB being so high, and every year there's a 10% increase in wages."

Also, Hurvitz says, people aren't paying attention to the cost of crude oil and freight. "Ten percent of all the crude that's consumed in the world is just for plastics and rubber," he says. "So the cost of making polyester has gone up so much, but it hasn't been passed along yet. It will, though. Our costs will go up."

And for Ash City specifically, Hurvitz has further global plans. "I'd like to take Ash City to Asia," Hurvitz says. "There's nothing like it there."

Distributor Entrepreneur of the Year
FRED PARKER, ACTIVATE

In 1995, Fred Parker jumped into the business world with both feet ... firmly planted in a pair of Wigwam Socks. Parker's first company was the sole representative of those socks to the golf industry, a market that the hosiery company had largely ignored. And while he was living an entrepreneurial dream, there were problems. "We were being paid a commission, yet we had to pay independent contractors a commission as well as cover operating expenses," he says. "The business model was just flawed."

Rather than throw in the towel, or socks as it were, Parker and his partners looked for other business opportunities. "We saw logos everywhere, so that was just a gut feel," Parker says. "When you're young and right out of college, you're doing anything just to figure out how to get a paycheck. It just started from there." Besides the excitement promotional products offered, the business model was something that worked for the company.

Since then, the growth has been nothing short of amazing – in 2010 the company realized sales growth of 26%, followed up by a 12% increase in 2011. And though with nearly \$27 million in 2011 revenues, he considers Activate! Promotions & Marketing (formerly Bluegrass Promotional Marketing, *asi/141964*) to be a small company, Parker says it's the sophisticated approach to business that has a huge effect on the work environment. "There's definitely a level of respect that's mutual throughout the entire organization, no matter what your position is, what your role is," Parker says. "That just breeds a lot of positive things in a work environment."

That work environment has changed over the last five years with large investments in the infrastructure – a new CRM system, voice-over IP system, communication system, etc. Most recently, a rebranding effort that has been years in the making has officially launched. "I think it's a new beginning," he says. "Our upgraded approach was very calculated, and we wanted to start it with our sales folks. It has invigorated new life and more energy into the sales force. That's a by-product I wasn't thinking of when we made the decision to do it."

Because of this, the future looks bright. "I didn't think we would grow it to where we are," Parker says, "but I think we're just getting started."



Fred Parker



Dan Taylor

Supplier Entrepreneur of the Year
DAN TAYLOR, BAMBAMS

For some, the gateway to the industry was a matter of happenstance, but for Dan Taylor it was a little more calculated. A psychology major in college who was too far into the program to change, Taylor couldn't suppress his desire to own his own business. So upon graduation, he started a forms distributorship.

He and his partner were considering additional avenues of revenue, and though they had fiddled around with promotional products in the past, it wasn't until they "tripped