When gauging influence and, yes, power, you can look at many factors. Business success is important. Sheer size of a company that an executive runs matters. But, there are intangibles, as well. Who is shifting strategies—and winning? Who is mentoring others in the market, and setting an agenda that many want to follow?

These are the attributes we look at when choosing members of the annual Counselor Power 50. The 2012 group has all of the traits above—and then some.

The people on the following pages set the agenda for the market, provide successful examples for others to follow, and ultimately, dictate how business is done in the ad specialty industry. You’ll find the 1-50 rankings along with reasons for why they place where they do on the list. Indicated along with each profile is where they placed on last year’s list, to reflect their changing influence on the market. Rankings are often based on a survey Counselor conducts, which asks the industry and the Power 50 themselves to rate whether each person on last year’s list has gained or lost influence over the past 12 months.

Turn the page to see the 2012 Power 50, as well as five profiles of members of this year’s Power 50 class who stand out from the crowd. Plus, wondering how this group views the market outlook, what they do in their spare time, and who they’d pay to hear give a speech? Check out the infographics that begin on page 68.
MICHAEL BERNSTEIN & DAVID NICHOLSON
POLYCONCEPT
THE STABILIZERS

“Y’ou're not going to compare me to Michael Carlesone, are you?” laughs Michael Bernstein, the recently installed chairman and CEO of Polycopert, referring to the famous Godfather quote from Vito’s favorite scene. “Just when I thought I was out, they pulled me back in.”

He’s asking because Bernstein, though he’s always remained a seat on the Polycopert board, had, in fact, left the industry entirely three years ago to run his boutique guitar company and immerse himself in the music industry. But as of May of this year, he was back in the promotional products business and at the helm of the world’s largest supplier company.

The why of that is the real question: “The reality was that Polycopert was facing significant challenges in Europe for a number of reasons, and the Board asked if I would get involved, and I thought I could potentially help,” Bernstein says, adding that he felt a sense of loyalty to the company, as his father founded Leed’s, the flagship entity within Polycopert North America. “The opportunity to transform the business model in Europe to more reflect what we’ve been successful doing in North America was a terrific challenge. Time will tell if everything we’re planning to work, but from a business challenge standpoint, coming back to the industry felt like the right next step for me.”

When asked about his outlook for the industry in 2013, Bernstein points out that his perception is framed in an international context as he’s spent the majority of his career in markets outside the U.S. “For Polycopert, we’re going to continue to grow, and online and catalog business is a core part of that growth strategy,” he says. “We anticipate the European market to be down around 10% in 2013, after declines of approximately 15% overall in 2012 and 10% down in the second half of 2012. The European crisis is a chilling ripple effect throughout the world and poses significant risks to the North American market, so we’re taking an overall conservative approach to 2013.”

Just how conservative? “We developed a truly global supplier company that gives Polycopert an opportunity to leverage its scale and expansive geographic positioning. “It seems to be the time in the industry when scale is going to become more of an issue.” Bernstein says. “I think it’s going to be an advantage. We don’t think the global industry is growing, nor do I think it has long-term growth prospects. Our strategy is to be a global player in the apparel market, following the evolution of global retail.”

Counselor named Shevin-Sandy its International Person of the Year in 2009, and she was also named to the list in 2011. “For our company, we’re looking at the 2013 fiscal year as our first year of real growth,” she says. “We have been hiring more employees each year to support the growth of our core businesses as well as our apparel expansion.”

With Bernstein’s main goal for next year “to increase profitability,” he aims to drive the growth of 4%-8% for the year, and the increase in growth of 4%-8% before taking into account the “ripple effect throughout the world and poses significant risks to the north American market.”

“I know how to do this,” Bernstein says, with a smile. “My grandfather and father gave Shevin-Sandy a list of 12 accounts that weren’t doing much business with us, and I was installed as CEO of Polyconcept North America. Jo-an Lantz, senior vice president of Polyconcept North America, views the official launch of Trimark Sportswear, Leed’s, Trimark Sportswear, as an offshoot of Polyconcept’s North American acquisition of competitor Anvil. She says, “With the arrival of the apparel sector in our portfolio, our international sales have grown exponentially.”

“T”he power of online and catalog business is a core part of our growth strategy,” says Bernstein. “We’re increasing our focus on digital marketing and sales, expanding our online presence, and continuing to do the work that makes us successful in our core businesses.”

Bonni Shevin-Sandy

“Because the market is changing so fast, we have to change our models accordingly,” says Shevin-Sandy. “The internet has become a go-to resource for online and catalog sales at Polycopert, and it’s important to be in tune with the latest trends and innovations.”

She’s asking because Bernstein, though his career has been centered in the music industry, is back in the promotional products business after receiving positive influence ratings from the industry for the past two years. “He’s asking because Bernstein, though his career has been centered in the music industry, is back in the promotional products business after receiving positive influence ratings from the industry for the past two years.”

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These are the facts. When Eric Belcher joined Inner-Workings (asi/168860) in 2005, the company had 97% of its business based in Illinois. The company’s yearly revenue was $76.5 million. Today, the distributor has recorded seven straight quarters of growth; is on pace for revenue between $780 and $810 million in 2012; underwent a massive international expansion; and is knocking on the door of becoming a Top 10 distributor in the ad specialty industry.

Belcher, who became CEO in 2009: “I, along with others at InnerWorkings, had the vision of becoming a major global player across all physical branded marketing materials.”

That’s about the biggest personal boast that can be elicited out of the company president and CEO. While Belcher staunchly believes in his company’s unique approach – “We’re convinced it’s the way of the future,” is a common sentiment of his – he nimbly deflects any notion of sole ownership for InnerWorkings’ rapid success. For example, what effect has Belcher had on the culture of the company?

“We ultimately measure ourselves based on our clients’ opinion of us,” says the 44-year-old, mentioning the company’s 98% client retention rate. “That’s a big part of the culture. And that hasn’t changed, and I don’t expect it to change going forward based on the way in which we manage our business.”

While many of the same values have been maintained on the inside, outward success has come quickly. The publicly-traded company grew its promotional product revenue by 27% from 2007 to 2011, and is slated to grow its overall revenue in 2012 by as much as 22% compared to last year. Belcher admits the company is in “full-blown growth mode right now.”

So, how has the Chicago-based distributor done it? It starts with its method of doing business – offering an array of branded services, which include promotional products as well as print management, direct mail, signage, fulfillment and more. The offering, Belcher says, is unique and enticing to its clients, even if it takes some effort to convince corporations that they should look to a single provider for all of these services.

“It takes quite a bit of education and trust,” he says. “Yet it’s a logical approach, and therefore, once we have an opportunity to show a client what we mean, how it works and our track record ... it can be a very convincing and persuasive argument.”

Next, Belcher spearheaded an aggressive expansion. InnerWorkings raised its national profile and then made a global jump, rising from just a half-dozen countries a couple of years ago to 44 countries today, with flagship offices in Brazil and France. Its strategy is to expand to the international markets in which its Fortune 500 clients are located to help service them better. (For example, InnerWorkings is now working with one high-level client in 15 different countries.) Besides some additional planned expansion in Asia, the distributor is focusing on fleshing out the international strongholds it has built. “I don’t think we’ll be looking to grow from 44 countries to 200 countries in the next two years,” Belcher says. “It’s more about growing with existing and new clients in markets where we’re established but not currently supporting them.”

What else is on Belcher’s plate? Additional collaboration across countries. Diversifying its client portfolio by working with middle market-sized companies. And, establishing internal creative studios, as did it for one Fortune 500 company. With no signs of let-up, the company’s rapid rise validates the vision set four years ago.

It even allows Belcher to indulge in a moment of pride. “We’ve been thinking big all along,” he says. “Along the way, we were told our approach wouldn’t work, particularly from people within our industry. But we hear that a little less now.” – CJM
brand Alliance arrived on the 2012 Top 40 at number 48 with $44.8 million in sales. The company, helmed by Alan Chippindale, is the second-largest distributor in Canada, and it approaches business in a unique way.

"Back in early 2008 there was a group of people – four distributors we started talking about creating a unique business model on the distributor side," Chippindale says. For months the principals involved spent time getting to know each other, the nuances of each company and what each could contribute to their client base. The discussions focused on eventually creating a new idea for their company, Chippindale states, and the value it offered their clients and the idea that there was real business value to the entity beyond being a purveyor of promotional products.

The merger of the four was announced to personnel a year and a half before it took place. They wanted to grow the BrandAlliance brand from the ground up, creating a mission statement and core values on which to build the new company. One of the themes that emerged was that distributors are in business to create brands for clients, but too often they don’t consider themselves to be a brand. That changed with BrandAlliance.

The merger finally happened in March 2010, and when the new entity opened its doors, a new idea was born. "Our tagline is ‘Build Your Brand Together,’" Chippindale says, noting that there isn’t a focus on products; the focus is on a culture of collaboration with clients. For him, the difference between a good client and a bad client is that the good client actually believes in the word "together." Chippindale says that while there is not one person in charge of attaining goals, it’s a collective effort and the leadership team is built from within and that it will continue to grow.

"The difference between a good client and a bad client is the kind of word ‘together.’

Operating in the Great White North isn’t all that different from the US. Chippindale says, "It’s our opinion that Cleveland is more similar to Toronto than it is to cities on the West Coast. The one major difference is that everything’s bigger in Canada. And the company’s success is due to the nationalistic approach it takes toward the marketplace. For instance, when the new company’s original name did not translate well into French, leaders shortened it to BrandAlliance.

Other reasons for success are client-driven growth, account penetration and team selling – as well as further alliances. "We are strategically pursuing mergers and acquisitions," Chippindale says, noting that the company made three acquisitions in the past summer in order to expand its presence within the needed market. The outlook for 2013 is conservative, yet Chippindale is forecasting growth. "We think the industry is going to expand, although we do think it has stabilized," he says. "We’re budgeting for growth – it’s tough now, but we’re looking at possibilities."
What’s your outlook for the industry in 2013?

- 86% POSITIVE
- 14% UNCERTAIN

What will be the industry’s biggest challenge going forward?

- Slow Economic Growth: 24%
- Margin Pressures: 12%
- Product Safety: 9%
- Government Regulations: 9%
- Sourcing Issues: 6%
- Online Accessibility: 6%
- Improving Value to Customers: 6%
- Reacting Faster to Trends: 6%

Other responses received one vote:

- All other responses

Power 50’s projected industry sales increase for 2013: 4.3% INCREASE

Who would you pay to hear speak?

- Warren Buffett: 13%
- Richard Branson: 6%
- Bill Clinton: 9%

Other top responses: Tim Tebow, Mark Cuban, Colin Powell, Marissa Mayer, Condoleezza Rice, Indra Nooyi

What book are you reading right now?

- Steve Jobs: A Biography: 13%
- Creativity: 20%
- Aggressiveness: 3%
- Responsiveness: 3%
- Being Professional: 3%
- Attention to Detail: 20%
- Trustworthiness: 14%
- Flexibility: 7%
- Focus: 7%
- Relationship Building: 7%
- Intelligence: 7%
- Commitment: 3%
- Desire: 3%
- Resilience: 3%

What company trait most determines success in the ad specialty business today?

- 14% Honesty
- 14% Flexibility
- 20% Creativity
- 20% Impact
- 3% Attention To Detail
- 3% Being Professional
- 3% Resilience
- 3% Synergy
- 3% Resilience
- 7% Commitment
- 7% Honesty
- 7% Insightfulness
- 7% Intelligence
- 7% Relationship Building
- 7% Focus
- 7% Honesty
- 6% Patience
- 3% Perseverance
- 3% Professionalism
- 3% Professionalism

Do you plan to increase, decrease or keep your employee head count the same next year?

- 76% INCREASE
- 3% DECREASE
- SAME = 21%

Finish This Sentence

In five years, social media will be ...

- "for old folks and companies, too!" – Bill Korowitz, The Magnet Group
- "like hip-hop music. Still here and appealing to a wide audience." – Craig Callaway, eCompanyStore
- "old news." – Paul Lorge, Gill Studios
- "more fragmented along the lines of people’s interests." – Joe Fleming, Hub Pen
- "simply called media."
- "more properly valued and viewed as a success accessory."
- "more properly valued and viewed as a success accessory."
- "surpassed by yet another technological advance that we have not even dreamed up."
- "different and targeted. Rather than a shotgun approach, we will see more filters, privacy issues will be a factor, and we will see more circles or groups."
- "overtaking our world!" – Jo-an Lantz, Geiger

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★ "for old folks and companies, too!"
Industry high – 125,000
BILL SCHMIDT, SR.

How many miles have you flown in 2012?
AVERAGE OF RESPONSES – 52,415 MILES

What's the first thing you do when you get into a hotel room?

- Call family
- Go to the bathroom
- Check temperature
- Go on the Internet
- Unpack
- Look out the window
- Sanitize TV remote
- Turn on TV
- Check messages
- Charge electronics
- Go on the Internet
- Check messages
- Sanitize TV remote
- Call family
- Go to the bathroom
- Check temperature
- Go on the Internet
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- Look out the window
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If you weren't in the ad specialty business, what would you be doing?

- Technology entrepreneur
- Golf industry
- Real estate
- Coaching high school sports
- Travel
- Banking

What is your favorite non-industry website?

- TheHill.com
- Google.com
- Bloomberg.com
- Amazon.com
- Reddit.com
- Ebay.com
- TheOnion.com
- Amazon.com
- Ted.com
- Ebay.com

Where was the last place you went on vacation?

- Europe
- U.S. East Coast
- U.S. West Coast
- U.S. Midwest
- Asia
- Canada
- Caribbean
- Other (2 responses: Prague (Jeff Lederer, Prime Line); Legoland (Kim Newell, Worldwide Lines))

What would you do with 30 minutes of free time?

- Spend time with family
- Exercise
- Read
- Play musical instrument
- Walk on the beach
- Call family
- Go to the bathroom
- Check temperature
- Go on the Internet
- Unpack
- Look out the window
- Sanitize TV remote
- Turn on TV
- Check messages
- Charge electronics

Which TV character is most like you?

AMONG MEN
- Phil Dunphy (Modern Family) 21%
- MacGruber (MacGruber) 11%
- Meredith Grey (Grey's Anatomy) 25%
- Peggy Olson (Mad Men) 25%

AMONG WOMEN
- Phil Dunphy (Modern Family) 21%
- MacGruber (MacGruber) 11%
- Meredith Grey (Grey's Anatomy) 25%
- Peggy Olson (Mad Men) 25%