

ASI's 60th ANNIVERSARY: Six Decades Of Shaping The Industry

From its humble start in 1950, ASI has grown to be an entity synonymous with innovation and creativity. Read on for a look at its storied history, its extensive impact on the ad specialty industry and how it continues to be a force of change.



By Michele Bell

What now exists as a multi-million dollar entity and a force for change, creativity, innovation and success in the ad specialty industry began 60 years ago in the dining room of a small home in West Philadelphia. When Joe Segel, ASI's founder, started the company, he could have hardly envisioned the powerhouse of influence it's become today.

As a student at the University of Pennsylvania, Segel supplemented his income by selling logoed products. While trying to find a source for "magic invisible ink cards," he became frustrated trying to navigate through a closed industry with little or no cohesion and transparency. Why wasn't there one list that contained all the companies that manufactured logoed items? As he began to look for sources of ad specialties, Segel quickly learned there was no directory of manufacturers for the industry – and quickly recognized a money-making opportunity.

Segel, the man who went on to found the Franklin Mint and QVC, clearly has entrepreneurialism imprinted on his DNA strand. Without hesitation, he embarked on weeks of research, culled the names of roughly 2,000 businesses and their contact information and sent the companies questionnaires to determine

if they were suppliers or distributors. The subsequent data became the basis of the very first *Advertising Specialty Register*.

ASI, the Advertising Specialty Institute, was the organization Segel formed to publish the *Register* – containing the names, addresses and product descriptions for over 1,000 suppliers – and other publications. The beginning of ASI marked the start of the ad specialty industry as a unified entity of promotional practitioners.

The Cohns Take The Reins

With the motto, "An informed businessman is a better businessman," ASI's first four years, between 1950 and 1954, when *Counselor* – the industry's first trade magazine – began publishing, were prodigiously precedent-setting and productive.

Segel helped organize the first ad specialty shows, created a numbering system to identify industry suppliers and distributors

– what’s now the ASI numbers – an order-processing system to standardize order-writing procedures, a distributor rating system, a geographic index of suppliers and distributors, monthly credit bulletins and credit summaries and the *Consolidated Catalog*, the industry’s first wide-ranging full-color catalog, arranged by price and

cross-indexed for easy reference.

As ASI grew, Segel began looking for new opportunities outside the ad specialty industry and in 1964 sold the company to Maurice Cohn, whose Iowa-based family had roots in ad specialties as a supplier. The Cohns owned a company called National Business Services, and with the

acquisition of ASI, they moved to the Philadelphia area and immersed themselves full-time into growing ASI and the industry. Norman Cohn, one of Maurice’s sons, was named chairman of the board in 1967 – a position he still holds today.

“Our industry was far different 60 years ago,” says Cohn. “There were less than

ASI Through The Years *by Joe Haley*



1950
Joe Segel produces the *Advertising Specialty Register* in his West Philadelphia row home, and launches ASI

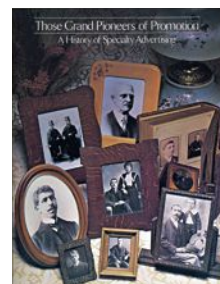


1954
The first issue of *Counselor* magazine is published



1968
Imprint, the industry’s first-ever end-buyer-focused magazine, publishes

1964
The Cohn family purchases ASI from Segel



1979
Counselor magazine prints *Those Grand Pioneers of Promotion*, the first recorded history of the advertising specialty industry

1974
Ann Morrissey is named the first female Person of the Year



1989
ESP, a CD-based product-sourcing system, debuts

1950s

1953
Segel founds the Advertising Specialty Guild of America and launches the very first ASI Show

1956
The *Consolidated Catalog* for the first time provides distributors with one source for all supplier product offerings

1960s

1965
Counselor magazine names its first-ever Person of the Year – Stanley Linham

1965
ASI hires Marvin Spike

1970s

1977
Counselor dissects the industry and produces the first State of the Industry issue

1977
Joe Segel is inducted into the PPAI Hall of Fame

1980s

1985
Counselor for the first time ranks the highest revenue-generating suppliers and distributors in the industry and prints the Top 20

2,000 distributors and it was dominated by 'direct houses,' which made much of what they sold, particularly calendars, in-house. It was pretty much a closed industry where distributors didn't want their salespeople to know any outside suppliers. The *ASI Register* and a number of other ASI products and services leveled the playing field."

One of the many industry benchmarks Cohn brought into the industry through ASI was the *Counselor* Top 20 list. Though it was expanded in 1992 to the *Counselor* Top 25 and again in 2001 to become the venerable Top 40 list known throughout the industry today, consider that when it was first introduced in 1982, Hazel

(*asi/60240*) held the top supplier spot at \$26 million in sales, with The Vernon Co. (*asi/351700*) topping the distributor list with \$51.45 million in sales. On the 2010 list of *Counselor* Top 40 companies, based on '09 sales, Norwood/BIC North America is the number-one supplier with \$410 million and Staples Promotional Products



1995
The first-ever Spirit Awards are handed out to suppliers and distributors

1990
Maurice Cohn is inducted into the PPAI Hall of Fame

1996
ASICentral.com, ASI's home on the Internet, debuts

THE ASI SHOW!

1998
ASI gets back into the show business, launching The ASI Show Las Vegas

2001
Distributors select their favorite suppliers in the first-ever Distributor Choice Awards

2003
ASI hires Tim Andrews to helm the company

2001
Counselor Top 25 becomes the Top 40

SUPPLIER GLOBAL RESOURCE

2005
Supplier Global Resource, the first industry magazine for suppliers only, publishes

2005
With an eye toward offering members increased and better services, ASI expands its affiliates program

2006
ASI acquires *Stitches and Wearables*

2006
Advantages Road Show launches

2006
Counselor runs its first-ever Power 50 list

2010
ASI Education creates a new certification system allowing members to earn Bachelor of Advertising Specialty Information (BASI) and Master of Advertising Specialty Information (MASI) designations

2010
ASI moves to technology-based products and services, including ESP Web & ESP Orders

2008
The ASI Radio Tuesday Morning Show broadcasts for the first time from its home studios in Trevoze

1990s

1992
The *Counselor* Top 20 becomes the Top 25

1997
Then-president Marvin Spike is inducted into the PPAI Hall of Fame

1997
A salesperson-focused, broadsheet publication called *Advantages* publishes

ADVANTAGES

2000s

2000
ASI moves to Trevoze, PA, to house all employees under one roof

2005
In an effort to generate more interest and press for the industry, ASI launches a PR initiative, garnering TV and print coverage at all ASI Shows

2004
ESP Online debuts

2007
Moving north, ASI launches ASI Canada

2007
ASI TV goes on the air from The ASI Show Las Vegas with an interview with CEO Tim Andrews

2007
ASI hosts suppliers and distributors at the first Power Summit, held at the Arizona Biltmore Resort & Spa in Phoenix

2009
First-ever Virtual Trade Show allows businesspeople to work a trade show from their own desks

“Our industry was far different 60 years ago. It was pretty much a closed industry where distributors didn’t want their salespeople to know any outside suppliers.”

NORMAN COHN



Shown here, three generations of the Cohns, the family that’s owned ASI since 1964 and continues its commitment to the company, its clients and the ad specialty industry today.

(*asi/120601*) ranks as the top distributor with \$360.8 million.

Perhaps the most telling yardstick for the industry’s growth and success that can be tied to the formation of ASI, is the following: When the company was founded 60 years ago, there were only a few hundred suppliers and not even a thousand distributors. Today, there are over 23,000 distributor members of ASI that purchase ad specialties from 3,200 supplier members. Moreover, the first

year the promotional products industry announced total sales volume, Segel and Cohn pegged it at \$459 million, compared to today’s \$15.9 billion.

Catalysts For Change

With just a handful of employees at ASI’s genesis, today it has a staff of nearly 500, and the fourth generation of the Cohn family interned at the company during their school break this past summer.

And while the Cohn family has made

it clear they plan to continue their commitment to ASI and the industry, in 2003 they brought in a new president to help the company grow as an ever-evolving resource for its clients into the next millennium.

With a background in journalism and coming from Dow Jones and Primedia, where he held the title of president, Tim Andrews – in conjunction with the Cohns – implemented game-changing initiatives to help ASI’s members stay successful and competitive in a technology-driven world morphing at a rapid pace.

A major achievement guided by the Cohns’ and Andrews’ vision has been the leveraging of technological advancements to create ESP Online and ESP Web, which are used by more than 75% of distributor firms. ASI often takes the role as the industry’s pace car, helping to drive the success of its members.

Unquestionably its most notable enhancement to the ad specialty industry came in 1998, with the launch of the ASI Shows. Based on feedback from industry professionals in key geographic areas who felt their trade-show needs weren’t being met, ASI kicked off its entrance into the show business with its Las Vegas show, the success of which led to shows in Orlando, Dallas, Chicago, New York and now San Diego being added to the roster, in addition to two traveling road shows dominating the marketplace: *Advantages* and *Stitches*.

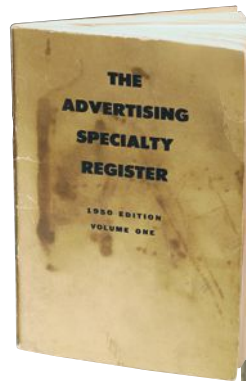
Other recent accomplishments include: utilizing video, radio and online social marketing; the acquisition of *Wearables* and *Stitches* magazines; the broadening of its membership to include the Canadian marketplace, with the formation of ASI Canada, and decorators; a new emphasis



ASI's first trade show, held in June 1998 in Las Vegas, was such a bit with exhibitors and attendees, it prompted the creation of five additional shows that are successful mainstays in the industry.

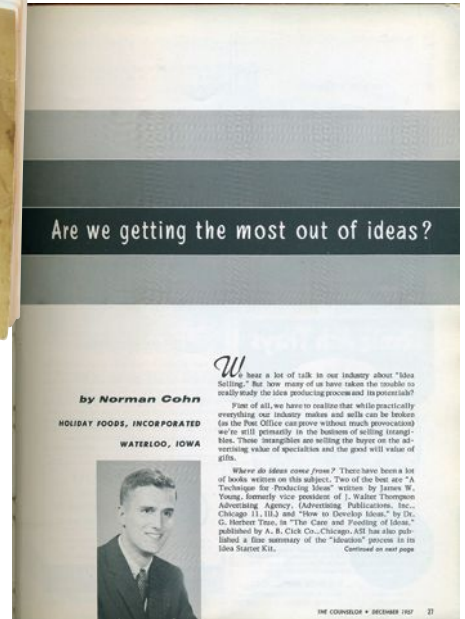
on educational initiatives such as the BASI (Bachelor of Advertising Specialty Information) and MASI (Master of Advertising Specialty Information) professional designations; the creation of its exclusive annual

The book that started it all, The Advertising Specialty Register – the first-ever listing of industry manufacturers – was printed by Joe Segel in 1950, the same year he founded ASI.



Power Summit event of seminars and networking; and an expanded roster of affiliate programs such as UPS, to give its members deep discounts and savings on critical operational services.

But perhaps most critical to the continued success of the industry is ASI's consistent commitment to raising awareness of ad specialties throughout the general marketplace with its unwavering efforts to generate press and PR through such



A supplier at the time, future ASI owner and chairman of the board Norman Cohn wrote an editorial in the December, 1957 issue of Counselor, presciently calling for idea-based selling.

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“For me, a discussion about the past 60 years of ASI is pretty interesting, but actually, I think a tremendous opportunity for growth of the industry focuses on the future, not our past,” says Tim Andrews, ASI's president/CEO. “It seems pretty clear to me that targeted, cost-effective ways to market or brand are more important today than ever, and will be more important tomorrow than today. Over and over, ASI research shows that promotional items are the most cost-effective way to promote a brand, and also one of the most meaningful because it puts in the hands of a customer or prospect something they really care about. So while the past 60 years have brought incredible growth to the industry and to ASI, I think the next 10 are going to be double where we end 2010.”

Michele Bell is senior editor of Counselor and editor of its sister publication, Supplier Global Resource.