



SUPPLIER OF THE YEAR

It's a family affair at Brighter Promotions, where Mike (left) started the company in 1983 and was joined by his son Jeff in 2006.

BRIGHTER PROMOTIONS

You need a certain glow to be the best, and at Brighter Promotions it applies to much more than its trailblazing products.

By C.J. Mittica



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Chicago, late 1970s. Mike Schrimmer cuts open a military light stick and sucks out the glowing green chemicals into tubing taken from his brother's aquarium. He fashions it into a glow necklace, and is immediately struck by the novelty of it. He makes more and hauls them down to the city's iconic Buckingham Fountain. Hawking them for \$3 apiece (and two for \$5), he sells hundreds, the thick wads of dollar bills stuffing his pants pockets as he drove his 1966 station wagon home that night.

Thus began ... Schrimmer's criminal career. "I was arrested for vending without a permit on the third night," he recalls. He abandoned the glow necklace and returned for three years to the working world, but the light of this lucrative idea stayed inside him, never dimming.

In 1983 he tried again, on more official terms, starting Chemical Light. As ubiquitous as glow products are now, at the time Schrimmer was one of a very few who pioneered the concept and brought it to market. Selling out of the garage and basement of a 1,700-square-foot house, the company at first had one blank product in one color. Today, Brighter Promotions (asi/42016) – as it was renamed over a decade ago when the chemicals gave way to LED lights – offers 8,000 imprinted light-up products to the promotional industry. It has a legion of distributors who swear by the quality of its products and the supplier's exceptional customer service. Schrimmer describes himself as a "kid who's never grown up," but in the meantime, his business has grown up to be Counselor's Supplier of the Year.

Designed to be Fun

What was it like for Jeff Schrimmer growing up? "I was always the envy of kids in schools," says the president of Brighter Promotions, who joined the company full-time in 2006 while in law school. "Other kids' parents were doctors and lawyers. My dad was the glow stick guy." While that meant working in the warehouse on days he didn't go to school, it also meant Schrimmer found instant friends at Halloween and birthday parties. "I remember many times I would take some 15" glow sticks, crack them and have light-saber battles with my friends," he recalls. "It was just awesome."

That sense of fun pervades at Brighter Promotions, where the insides of its Vernon Hills, IL-based headquarters are decked with pop culture touchstones, like C-3PO and R2-D2 from *Star Wars* and an actual DeLorean. Workers at the company can attend movie screenings in the office's very own theater. It's all fitting of a company that aims to sell amusement with each of its products – necklaces, glasses, ice cubes, drink cups and thousands of other light-up products, including (yes) lightsabers.

The atmosphere has been present from the very start of the company, derived from Mike's sense of child-like wonderment – a kid who never had to leave the childish things behind. In a less obvious way, it's very much at the heart of Brighter Promotions' success. Over the years, Mike has gravitated toward people with qualities he admires – intelligence, tenacity, youthful enthusiasm – and persuaded them to join the company. This



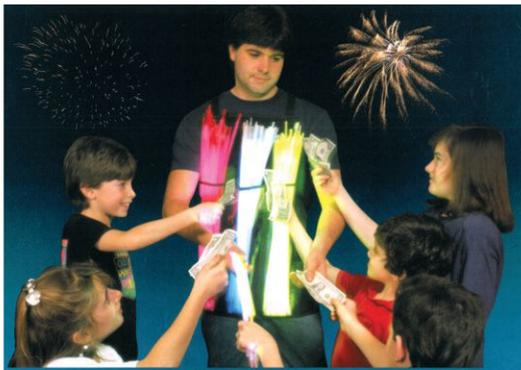
Brighter Promotions' offices are filled with pop culture memorabilia, including a functioning DeLorean (above) and robots from *Star Wars* and *Lost in Space*.



Mike Schrimmer poses with Steven Spielberg, Mickey Rooney and J.J. Abrams.

hasn't always happened by the most traditional means. The company's head of sales was a military medic working in a hospital in 2000 when Schrimmer was a patient. Waiters and photocopier salespeople have become top performers at the company. (Don't say "employees" – to the Schrimmers, they are people they work with.)

Once at the company, the Schrimmers strive to treat them fairly and like family. Almost every one of the company's 120 people in the U.S. has asked and received for a loan at some point. The overall



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“We’ve empowered talented people to make it right to our customers.”

Mike Schrimmer, Brighter Promotions

approach certainly has worked; the average tenure of salespeople at the company is 15 years. Most important, Brighter Promotions’ people receive a lot of latitude to do their jobs, in everything from quality control to sales to customer service. “We’ve empowered talented people to make it right to our customers,” says Mike.

You don’t just have to rely on his word. MKM Distributors once ordered an item from another supplier who later confessed it didn’t have the inventory and could not possibly deliver on time. President Mark Dudovitz went to Adam Lewkowicz, his longtime account executive at Brighter Promotions, and explained the direness of the situation. The supplier delivered the large order in short notice without any discussion of a rush fee.

“It wasn’t their problem and it wasn’t their screwup,” says Dudovitz. “But they

took it on because we’re a customer of theirs. The impression I got is truly they were trying to help us. And that’s really rare.” In 30 years of working with Brighter Promotions, Dudovitz says the supplier has never missed a deadline. No matter the circumstances, “they’ve made it work every single time,” he says. “The thing I love about them is, they’ll find a way to skin a cat.”

The result has been extremely high performance ratings in ESP, with distributors providing Brighter with near-perfect scores across the board. With five-star ratings in every ESP performance category ranging from overall satisfaction and communication to delivery and problem resolution, it’s easy to see why the data leads Brighter Promotions to become this year’s Supplier of the Year.

And while distributors laud the supplier’s customer service and pricing, they’re

President Jeff Schrimmer got started in the family business early, appearing at the age of 4 in this print ad (red shirt).

equally complimentary of Brighter Promotions' attention to product quality and innovation. "We work with several vendors who have delivered things that just don't work," says Todd Becker, partner with Ben S Loeb Incorporated. "That's never been the case with Brighter Promotions."

There's a reason – the supplier incorporates three layers of quality control, which includes inspecting every single item to make sure it works. If a product doesn't look good, or if an imprint isn't sharp enough, the appropriate teams have the power to scrap it and start over, without running it up the company hierarchy.

Even if mistakes should occur, the goal is always to "make sure the customer is happy, regardless of the financial ramifications," Mike says. That philosophy is baked into the way Brighter Promotions prioritizes long-term relationships over quick sales. "We are definitely a relationship-building company," says Jeff. "If somebody wants to order from us once, sure we'll sell to them, but we want to convert them to a lifetime customer."

Lighting the Way

How tough is the light-up business? "Cut-

throat," says Jeff off-handedly, casting in stark contrast the joy of fun products with the reality of building a successful business behind it. In 1994, Brighter Promotions had 200 items in its catalog. Two decades later, the company has increased its offering by 40 times and is constantly coming up with new products. The truth is that light-up novelties are defined by, well, novelty, and no one seems to do it better than Brighter Promotions. "They're really good at either understanding what the market needs," says Becker, who services the adult beverage industry, "or bringing something new to the market that we didn't even know we can use that makes sense."

In addition, Brighter Promotions tries to stand out in several other ways. The company offers 24-hour turnaround on most of its products. "The speed of our turnaround is unmatched in this industry," Mike says. "It's one of the things we've had to do to deal with competitors that are out there."

Also, the company leveraged its relationships overseas and now offers direct sourcing for distributors for products that Brighter Promotions does not offer. "We already had the investment in our own quality control

and sourcing team," says Jeff, who is heavily involved with the company's production of proprietary items. "For our own products, we had everything in place. The thought was, 'If we're able to do this for ourselves so well, let's see what distributors are looking for that isn't part of our normal line and help arrange direct production for them.'"

Brighter Promotions too, hopes to expand its product lineup in the future. Right now it's eyeing up electronic accessories and something the Schrimmers ambiguously refer to as "interactive items," preferring to keep that tidbit close to the vest. The company wants to add state-of-the-art decorating equipment and expand its range of imprint options. Lastly, it is looking to build a couple of its own factories in Asia, and exploring options to partner with U.S. factories as well.

It's a remarkable journey for a company that started with a single spark of ingenuity. When Schrimmer fashioned that glow necklace, "I just thought it was cool, period," he recalls. Over three decades later, that much remains the same.

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