

Show How to Get it Done



Even when the economy is humming along nicely (as it seems to be doing in most if not all sectors in Michigan), there are still the stand-out firms and organizations that rise above it all. And that's what the Economic Bright Spots and Entrepreneurs of Distinction competition is all about.

These are the companies that live for success.

Yes, they've been through challenges. And many of them have experienced real hardship as they weather economic storms. But persistence along with those tremendously helpful good ideas are at the heart of many of the firms that have made the list.

As you might expect, with economic good times among us, getting the right people in place to help with that growth has special significance to firms like **A-Line Staffing Solutions**, which focuses on making sure they have the software in place to help clients manage the applicant process.

Do a good job and you'll be even more successful. Says A-Line Staffing's Daniel Lochocki: "Our success in staffing health care related professionals has our clients asking us to staff other types of skill sets."

Engineering is another sector where the sun is shining.

Consider **Altair Engineering**, which provides clients with the tools they need to develop new products and make informed decisions and is this year's overall winner of the Economic Bright Spots awards. CEO and Founder Jim Scapa has seen more than momentum in his industry.

“We see computer-aided engineering beginning to drive the design process rather than serving as a verification tool,” he says. “Simulation-driven design will enable the designer to make full use of the intelligence afforded by technology, changing design paradigms and facilitating innovation.”

When the economy is rocking, so is a business dedicated to making sure people get to where they need to be to make those sales.

That’s certainly the case with **AristocatChauffered Transportation**, which has implemented new state-of-the-art software that’s transformed the company into one where only the world is the limit for future growth.

And getting products from one place to another within a plant is a growing sector as well.

Consider **Automation and Modular Components** as an example of an engineered modular conveyor solutions and components manufacturer that’s well known by the automotive, pharmaceutical, electrical, appliance, solar, battery and other production industries.

The company says it’s one of the few automation suppliers that engineer and produce their own products in the USA, a fact that’s made possible only by a strong support staff of engineers and technicians who provide first-hand knowledge of its products along with application support and customer training seminars.

Getting those firms the capital they need to grow in a way that attracts customers is part of what keeps **Blackford Capital** busy with its strategy of acquiring, managing and building middle-market manufacturing, distribution and service companies. The firm reviewed some 3,400 transactions in 2013, and has closed some 26 deals in the past seven years.

But some of the strength of the economy is occurring in the so-called service industry, one standout player being **Diplomat**, a specialty pharmacy business based in Flint. This

year, Diplomat partnered with Kmart Pharmacy to give its shoppers access to specialty medications, which are projected to account for more than half of all sales in the top 100 prescription products by 2018.

But it's manufacturing that's heated up significantly.

Consider as an example **Experi-Metal Inc.**, now a premier sheet metal component and assembly supplier occupying a campus with more than 250,000 square feet of manufacturing and warehousing space and some 160 workers.

It has also expanded its marketplace globally beyond its automotive roots into aerospace, military, homeland security and alternative energy.

Still, making sure those strategies play out in the marketplace depends on the kind of work done by companies like **Global Business Solutions & Associates**, which focuses on the value of minimizing overhead and maximizing virtual talent. "On a daily basis, we become aware of opportunities that are within the scope of our capabilities," says CEO Joan J. Epperson.

And sometimes it's also a matter of diversifying.

That was the case with Sean Halpin, whose **Halpin Solutions** (formerly Halpin Design) went beyond being a supplier of design and engineering services to a developer of innovative products like his PutterPower device that charges phones and even has a flashlight for golfers that want to finish in the dark.

In the case of **ImageSoft**, that "shift" came when owner Scott Bade transformed the integration company into one that now develops software products for the legal industry.

"More and more of our revenue is attached to our own products," says Bade, who founded the company in 1996 and now has 70 employees.

And sometimes it's a matter of sticking to a well-researched strategic plan. That was the advice Lynn Drake, president of **Compass Commercial**, gave when winning the overall

honor as Entrepreneur of Distinction during the awards ceremony June 12 at VisTaTech Center in Livonia.

The stories continue in a time when economic renewal, perhaps buoyed by less government bureaucracy and an endearing desire to put a good idea (or two) to work for clients, employees and owners promises to energize the economy.

And that's what we really like to hear. J.D. Booth

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ENTREPRENEURS OF DISTINCTION



Lynn Drake

Compass Commercial ITRA Global

Troy, Mich.

www.compass-commercial.com

Lynn Drake says she was destined to be an entrepreneur. “Both of my parents were entrepreneurs. Even though I spent 25 years working in big corporations, it always felt like I was a square peg trying to fit into a round hole,” she says. Now the leader of Compass Commercial LLC, a firm that represents global tenants and buyers of commercial real estate, she prides herself on putting the needs of clients ahead of her company, which she founded in 2010. Perhaps that sense of purpose came from her experience as she turned 40. “I decided to climb a mountain near Butte, Mont. With no experience or expectations I climbed to 15,000 feet above sea level. At the top we had an hour of silence. It was there that I made the decision to make a change in my life.” Drake says a series of opportunities led her to start Compass Commercial as a way to provide women and minorities a safe place to work in commercial brokerage. “I was in a large brokerage firm for seven years and I brought in lots of business and was the second highest sales person in the office,” she recalls. “One day I realized I had referred out over a half a million dollars in referrals and had only received a handful in return. That along with the nudging from my business coach sent me out to open a business where I created a culture based upon diversity and integrity.” Drake’s love for the industry as well as for running her business keeps her motivated for work. She also

has a great support group. “When I do run into issues that I don’t know how to handle I have a group of ladies who also own their own businesses,” she says. “It really helps to have someone who understands what it is like to stand in the entrepreneur shoes.” The biggest challenge, she notes, is finding the right employees. “I would like to see less money spent on unemployment dollars and more money into training people for new careers,” Drake says.

Author: J.D. Booth