

# Fastest-Growing Distributor

## #1 Brandito – A Passion For Success

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It's not a good thing when prospects hang up on you. But that's exactly what happened to Michael Lovern – over and over again. “Our two biggest customers basically hung up on us the first two months,” says Lovern, managing partner of Brandito (*asi/325944*), a distributor in Richmond, VA. “Literally hung up the phone.”

It wasn't a pleasant experience, but it taught an important lesson: To make it in the promotional products marketplace, where competition can be intense and prospects flat-out rude, Lovern would need a fresh approach. Since those early struggling days, you bet he found one.

Over the past five years, in fact, the fledgling distributorship has managed to win over those two once-surly prospects and many more, reaching a growth rate as high as 168% at one point. With sales skyrocketing from \$518,000 its first year to more than \$1.2 million two years later, it's little wonder why Brandito tops the fastest-growing distributor list.

These days, the firm's annual growth rate stands at 40%, boosted by an ever-expanding client base. This year, Lovern expects sales will hit nearly \$2 million. With that, Lovern is closer to making good on his promise to shake up an industry that he says was “viewed as stale and could use a nice change.”

Lovern, 33, has never pretended to be an expert, but he's always had a plan. “When I started this company, I knew very little about the industry outside of what I'd heard from other folks that had been in it,” he says. What he did know is that he wanted a diverse client base. That meant small, medium and large customers. It also meant local, regional and national companies. “We didn't want to just go after one specific client,” says Lovern, who previously worked in sales for staffing and recruiting companies.

Using that experience, he formulated a sales strategy that pinpointed companies by geography, regardless of size. “We said, ‘let's identify folks in the immediate area that we feel would be good targets,’” Lovern says. Those “good targets” included everything from startups with 10 employees to *Fortune* 100 corporations.

Meeting with prospects was often drudgery, Lovern recalls. Too often he and his two-man sales team heard a multitude of rejections: “Hey, we already have a vendor. We're happy with who we're using,” or just plain “no.” “People are going to tell you everything

under the sun to get rid of you,” he says. “A lot of distributors will find the low-hanging fruit, and that’s how they’re going to build their book.” But not Brandito.

Perhaps it was his sales background, but Lovern believed that persistence would crack even the toughest multi-million dollar clients. He understood his company, which has since grown to five employees, wouldn’t find success overnight; he used that knowledge to actually prop up his team, setting expectations about the potential length of sales cycles, particularly with bigger prospects.

“Because the Fortune 500s are a longer sales cycle,” it involves a tremendous amount of work to land an order, but Lovern remembers telling his staff that it would be a consistent client. In other words, it might take longer to get there, but the effort would be worth it. “It’s not as simple as saying, ‘here’s what we do,’” Lovern says.

To beat out and, more importantly, steal business away from other distributors, Lovern says, the company developed a consultative sales approach. “Everybody in the industry says the same thing,” Lovern acknowledges, that “we’re all about relationships and being a solution provider.”

But Lovern thinks Brandito offers something others don’t: passion. Sounds hokey, but he insists it’s a genuine part of the company’s philosophy. And when he’s talking about passion he doesn’t mean for the industry. In fact, when Lovern interviews applicants – something he’s done a lot of lately, as Brandito expands – he rarely asks them what they know about ad specialties or even the firm. In fact, he couldn’t care less if they’re even interested.

“To be honest, when people come in and interview, I don’t even look at the resume,” Lovern says. Instead, Lovern wants to know what they’re driven by. If applicants have no passions in life, then they won’t get a job offer. Simply put, “passion creates drive,” Lovern says. “It’s like pulling teeth if they don’t have it.” And without it, they can’t be good at sales.

That approach to selling has paid off. Prior to working with Brandito three years ago, CARFAX was “bouncing around to whoever was giving us the best price,” says Rachel McMann, special events coordinator for the Centerville, VA-based vehicle history website. Brandito, she says, won over CARFAX marketers with a sales strategy that is more consultative in nature.

For example, Lovern, according to McMann, often initiates better branding tactics through the use of updated logos applied to specific CARFAX events, or new products that he scours trade shows for with the company in mind. “It’s great, and we trust him 100%,” McMann says, adding that Lovern’s in-person meetings with the company about every four months help to solidify their partnership.

Lovern says acquiring and keeping valuable client relationships has often been accomplished through the smallest of details. “It could be changing your voicemail just to say, ‘hey, I’m in the office all day long,’ or ‘hey, I’m traveling today,’” Lovern says. Or maybe it could involve nudging a client towards lasering a logo on a jacket instead of using typical embroidery, just to freshen the look. Really, it’s about whatever it takes to be a cut above, to help clients know Brandito will always be uncommon and interesting.

Certainly, mastering time management has been another key to keeping up with Brandito’s growth, Lovern says. His team repeatedly asks itself the same questions week after week: How can we best manage time in the office? What should be done first? How can we successfully juggle what’s in front of us? When you’re “growing like gangbusters,” Lovern says, these are extremely important questions. By asking them and improving processes, the company is better able to focus on what it can do for its clients and, ultimately, for its rapidly advancing top line.

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Top 10 largest growers, as measured by sales increases between 2011 and 2013.

