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Forbes Small Giants 2016: Where Are They Now?



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Last year Forbes ran its [inaugural list of Small Giants](#), a select group of companies that prioritized greatness over growth. We picked 25 businesses with sound business models, strong balance sheets and profit margins. We also looked for companies that were acknowledged as outstanding in their field. These are businesses that have stuck to a human scale, meaning frontline employees have real interactions with top leaders. Each is privately owned.

Few have stood still in the last year. West Paw Design still makes all its dog toys in its Montana factory but has started exporting to China, while high-end faux Christmas tree seller Balsam Brands has moved into year-round florals, and 100-year-old little red wagon maker Radio Flyer's miniature replica of a Tesla Model S sold out the day it went on





Radio Flyer's new Tesla Model S for kids.

Abt Electronics, Chicago. **Co-presidents:** Jon, Michael, Ricky and Billy Abt, **Revenue:** \$450 Million (est.) **Employees:** 1,450

The largest independent electronics retailer in the U.S., Abt has continued to invest in its single, mammoth 450,000-square-foot store, building a 10,000-square-foot "Inspiration Studio" that houses 12 demonstration kitchens outfitted with appliances by companies like Sub-Zero. It also added a 10,000-square-foot furniture store. Jon Abt says the company has grown revenues by 10% in the past year. He also says the company is planning to add a Dylan's Candy Bar sweet shop to the various attractions (including a dancing fountain and a 7,500 gallon saltwater aquarium) in its store. "We are a family business and want to keep families happy and entertained while they shop," he says.

Afterburner, Atlanta. **Founder and CEO:** Jim Murphy, **Revenue:** \$8.5 million, **Employees:** 18 full-time, 50 contractors

Afterburner has moved to emphasize longer-term relationships with its management consulting clients in addition to the military-themed presentations it is known for. It's also developing digital training services. Founder Jim Murphy says the new structure gives his staff stronger incentives to sell consulting services and not just one-off events. Adopting it, however, meant hiring a new leadership team which caused flat revenue in 2016. [Read more about Afterburner here.](#)

Air Force One, Columbus, Ohio. **CEO:** Greg Guy. **Revenue:** \$31 million. **Employees:** 172

Commercial heating, ventilation and air conditioning service provider Air Force One is taking further steps to encourage cooperation among staffers in its seven regional offices. Three years ago, it got rid of commissions for its sales staff, instead offering profit sharing to each office that exceeds goals. Now CEO Greg Guy is introducing a profit-sharing arrangement that incorporates both regional and company-wide goals. The aim: encourage specialists in one office to offer their expertise to colleagues in other regions. [Read more about Air Force](#)

[One here.](#)

Askinosie Chocolate, Springfield, Mo. **CEO and Founder:** Shawn Askinosie. **Revenue:** \$2 million. **Employees:** 17

Last year eccentric artisanal chocolate maker Shawn Askinosie, 56, introduced a premium chocolate bar he calls [1098](#). That's the year the Cistercian order of Catholic monks was founded in France, which means a lot to Askinosie because he's a "family brother" at a local Cistercian Trappist monastery. He produced exactly 1,098 of the special 1.7-ounce bars, which sell for \$14 and come inside a cloth bag hand-stitched by Trappist monks. Askinosie's standard 3-ounce bars go for \$8.50. Each is made solely with cocoa beans sourced from one of the three countries where he does business directly with farmers. He shares up to 10% of his profits with the farmers, and travels each year to meet with them and show them his books. In Tanzania last year, he had his accounts translated into Swahili. [Read more about Askinosie Chocolates here.](#)

[See The Full Small Giants 2017 List Here](#)

Balsam Brands, Redwood City, Calif. **Founder and CEO:** Thomas "Mac" Harman. **Revenue:** \$115 million. **Employees:** 146

Balsam Brands' original line of high-quality fake Christmas trees fetch as much as \$1,000 and are still selling well. But CEO Mac Harman is optimistic about his faux florals, Balsam's first line of products not tied to a holiday. Introduced in February, they include potted plants, trees, wreaths and flower arrangements. The petals of the \$69 peony bouquet are made of a polymer that feels like a real flower.

Bi-Rite Market, San Francisco. **Founder:** Sam Mogannam. **Revenue:** \$46 million. **Employees:** 300

Specializing in locally sourced food grown by small producers, Bi-Rite Market runs two grocery stores and an ice cream and bake shop that sells products made with honey from its own roof-top bee hives. It also has a catering service, where sales grew 26% last year. The grocery stores posted revenue increases in the last year, but sales dipped at the creamery, located in San Francisco's rapidly gentrifying Mission district, where it faces competition from more than a dozen other ice cream shops.

Big Ass Fans, Lexington, Ky. **CEO and founder:** Carey Smith, **Revenue:** \$239.5 million, **Employees:** 960

After dominating the market for industrial fans through business-to-business sales, Big Ass Fans opened its first brick and mortar

showroom in Houston in September 2016, with a second planned in Fort Lauderdale later this year. Four years ago, the company launched Big Ass Solutions, which sells high-end residential fans and LED lighting. Next up: a range of air conditioning products slated for release in the spring of 2018. [Read more about Big Ass Fans here.](#)



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Blink UX, Seattle. **Cofounder and CEO:** Karen Clark Cole,
Revenue: \$12 Million, **Employees:** 70

Blink UX is a consulting firm that advises corporate clients on how to improve their digital interaction with customers. CEO Karen Clark Cole says she's focused on growing the company to more than \$20 million in revenue, which will require changing the way Blink UX sells to customers like Starbucks, Amazon and Microsoft. In addition to project work, she wants to cultivate long-term relationships with clients. "Digital is not a product anymore," she says, "it's a horizontal thing that stretches across every aspect of a company."

Cue Ball Group, Boston. **CEO:** Tony Tjan. **Assets Under Management:** \$200 million. **Employees:** 15

Cue Ball models its venture capital strategy on Warren Buffett: buy and hold instead of betting on quick returns. Since Forbes ran a [feature](#) on the company last year, Cue Ball has added seven companies to its portfolio and exited two, for a total of 27 investments. Adobe bought online commenting platform Livefyre last May, and corporate wellness social platform ShapeUp, merged with a larger rival, Richard Branson-backed Virgin Pulse, shortly after we published. (Cue Ball turned around and invested in Virgin Pulse.) New investments include Jopwell, a platform where companies can recruit minority hires, and women's career site Landit. "We love the HR tech space," says Cue Ball CEO Tony Tjan. A company Cue Ball built from the ground up, the MiniLuxe chain of nail salons, which pays above-market wages and observes strict

hygiene standards in a notoriously exploitative, unregulated industry, has more than doubled in size to 21 locations. Its first Los Angeles studio scored a publicity win at this year's Oscars, when Nicole Kidman wore a rose gold MiniLuxe nail polish called Sunset Boulevard. [Read more about Cue Ball Group here.](#)

ENT Institute, Atlanta. **Founder and CEO:** Jeff Gallups, **Revenue:** \$31 million, **Employees:** 168

After closing three of its 17 ear, nose and throat medical offices and acquiring its first out-of-state practice in Starkville, Miss., ENT Institute is poised for growth in the second half of 2017. "The Forbes article was huge," says founder Jeff Gallups. After the Small Giants list appeared last February, more than a dozen practices in eight states contacted him wanting to sell. He plans to buy four this year. While 2016 revenue climbed \$4 million over 2015, EBITDA jumped to \$7.4 million from \$3.6 million.

Fresno First Bank, Fresno, Calif. **CEO and President:** Steve Miller, **Revenue:** \$14 million, **Employees:** 43

"We had a fantastic 2016," says Fresno First Bank CEO Steve Miller. Assets at the bank, which has only one location and caters to the needs of small businesses, grew by 20% last year to \$363 million, while revenue was up 20%. One source of new accounts: San Francisco equity crowdfunder Breakaway Funding, which agreed last year to refer its startup customers to Fresno First.

Gainesville Health & Fitness, Gainesville, Fla. **Founder and CEO:** Joe Cirulli, **Revenue:** \$16.5 million, **Employees:** 480

After five years and an investment of \$9 million, Gainesville Health and Fitness finished its makeover in February. The health club founded in 1978 by Joe Cerulli, 63, expanded the footprint of its main center by 12,000 square feet, creating specially-designed studios for workouts like cycling and X-Force Body, a twice-a-week weight loss and strength building program Cerulli swears by. The club also renovated its women-only facility, installing all new equipment, and replacing lights, flooring and furniture.

Headsets.com, San Francisco. **Founder and CEO:** Mike Faith, **Revenue:** \$26 million (est.), **Employees:** 44

Headsets.com still includes Tootsie Rolls in every package of phone headsets it ships to its million-plus business customers, in keeping with its "be whacky" core company value. Last year it introduced European-designed \$230 Leitner brand headsets to its product line.

Innotec, Zeeland, Mich. **President:** Mike Lanser, **Revenue:** \$90 million, **Employees:** 400

In the last year, Innotec formed its first-ever overseas joint ventures, in Korea and India, where it will manufacture its lighting, formed metal and power-distribution products for the auto, office-furniture and retail-lighting markets. It already has plants in China, Hungary, Mexico and at its Michigan headquarters. Owned in part by its employees, the company has a flat, decentralized organizational structure that gives each of its manufacturing lines, called "cells," control over its own balance sheet. The cells report results monthly.

Integrated Project Management, Burr Ridge, Ill. **Founder and CEO:** C. Richard Panico, **Revenue:** \$33 million, **Employees:** 159

Since 1988, consulting firm Integrated Project Management has helped companies manage complex projects. Example: combining product lines and meshing HR and IT systems after a merger. The company added 34 customers in the last year, boosting sales 10%. Founder and CEO Rich Panico has won a slew of awards for the inclusive way he manages his staff, whom he calls "family members," and two business schools have done case studies. "We tell prospective family members that if you lie once, you're going to get fired," he says. "I don't believe we can repair character flaws." New hires are told they are joining "a spiritual company," says Panico, with fundamental values that include excellence, caring, humility and respect.

McRoskey Mattress, San Francisco. **CEO:** Robin McRoskey Azevedo, **Revenue:** \$6.3 million, **Employees:** 30

For the first time in its 118-year history, McRoskey Mattress is selling a mattress not designed to be paired with a box spring. "We don't follow gimmicks," says 75-year-old CEO Robin McRoskey Azevedo, whose grandfather cofounded the company. But with so many of its loyal customers buying beds designed for mattresses sans box springs, she decided to introduce the Platform Tufted. The queen sells for \$2,500, a substantial savings on the \$5,200 price tag for the traditional mattress and box spring combo. Under pressure from direct-to-consumer startups like Casper and Tuft & Needle, McRoskey's revenue fell in 2016 by nearly \$1 million.

New Belgium Brewing, Fort Collins, Colo. **Chairperson and Cofounder:** Kim Jordan, **Revenue:** \$236 million (est.), **Employees:** 785

Shortly before our list appeared last year, [Reuters reported](#) that New Belgium Brewing was shopping for a buyer for the 100% employee-

owned craft beer maker. The price tag: more than \$1 billion. After talks with several suitors, New Belgium chose to remain independent, for now. Meantime CEO Christine Perich jumped ship in October, leaving the company searching for a top boss. Nevertheless, sales grew by nearly 5% in 2016 as New Belgium sharply boosted capacity when it opened its second brewery, built on a brownfield site in Asheville, N.C. that used to be an auto salvage stockyard. It's introduced eight new brews since our list appeared, including Tartastic Lemon Ginger Sour Ale, a tingly concoction already posting strong sales. [Read more about New Belgium Brewing here.](#)

Quality Bicycle Products, Bloomington, Minn. **President:** Rich Tauer, **Revenue:** \$212 million, **Employees:** 700

As cities from Seattle to Chicago added new cycling lanes in 2016 and Americans spent more time on bikes, Quality Bicycle Products, the nation's largest wholesale distributor of bicycle parts and accessories, kept pace, with 2016 sales climbing 6% over the previous year. The company owns bike brands like Salsa and Surly, but it cut its selection from seven brands to six, dropping Cogburn, a fat-tire bike used by hunters and anglers. Most of QBP's 5,500 bike dealer partners weren't interested in promoting the brand.

Radio Flyer, Chicago, **CEO:** Robert Pasin, **Revenue:** \$110 million, **Employees:** 110

The century-old toy company known for its little red wagons has introduced a miniature replica of the Tesla Model S. Designed for three- to eight-year-olds, its rechargeable lithium-ion battery powers a top speed of 6mph. Tweeted billionaire Tesla founder Elon Musk: "The baby Model S really is quite fun." The first run sold out the day it debuted on Radio Flyer's website in February 2016. [Read more about Radio Flyer here.](#)

Redmond, Heber City, Utah. **CEO:** Rhett Roberts, **Revenue:** \$65 million, **Employees:** 320


Since 1992, Redmond has marketed its reddish-hued salt as a premium product. Mined on the grounds of a defunct Utah family farm, its products include sea salt, and salt for livestock and pets. It also sells Redmond Clay, a remedy for both diarrhea and constipation when ingested, and for cuts when applied to an open wound. The company shares 10% of profits with employees and in 2016, it expanded a solar project that now supplies all the power at its salt mine and main processing plant.

Service Express Inc., Grand Rapids, Mich. **CEO:** Ron Alvesteffer,

Revenue: \$70 million, **Employees:** 335

SEI made its first acquisition last year, buying a small company in Pittsburgh in the same business, on-site maintenance for companies' data centers. It also moved up plans to open a Phoenix office when it learned in one of its regular employee goal-setting sessions that a valued staffer wanted to relocate there to be near family. [Read more about Service Express here.](#)

Tasty Catering, Elk Grove Village, Ill. **Cofounder and CEO:** Tom Walter, **Revenue:** \$10 million, **Employees:** 49 full-time and 132 part-time

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