

## Premier Beauty Supply celebrates 30th anniversary

Independent full-service salon distributor **Steve Cohn** is a fighter. From his love of recreational boxing to fighting to save **Premier Beauty Supply** when he almost lost everything and rebounded back even stronger, he puts on the gloves, gets down in the trenches and makes things happen.

This year, Steve and his team at the Northbrook, IL-based family-owned distributorship are celebrating their thirtieth year in business. **Beauty Industry Report** recently caught up with Steve to profile his entrepreneurial journey, find out what's next and celebrate his success.

**BIR: Welcome, Steve. Reaching your 30-year anniversary is quite an accomplishment. Tell us about your journey.**

**SC:** When I founded Premier in 1988, the core values and goals were simple. I wanted to give our customers a reason to do business with us, employees a reason to join our team and manufacturers a reason to allow us to represent them in our marketplace. Now, 30 years later, we at Premier strive day in and day out to meet those goals and are proud to be among the largest independent distributors in the Midwest.

Our goal is to be a great partner for both our customers and vendors. Our 38 distributor salon consultants provide salons and beauty professionals in Illinois, Indiana, Ohio and Michigan with the top professional boutique products lines in the industry.

It is challenging to do business outside of our home base. We are a relationship-driven company and need to work twice as hard to earn those relationships outside of the Chicago market. Our goal is not to be the biggest distributor, but the best. Our biggest point-of-difference is that everyone in the company is fully accessible. My cell number is even on our website.

**BIR: Tell us about your struggles.**

**SC:** In 2007, due to marketplace circumstances beyond our control, we lost the vast majority of our business and had to rebuild basically from scratch. Since then, it has been an incredible journey. The key word is

"journey!" We have been very fortunate to be given opportunities by brands and supported by our customers to allow us to re-invent ourselves. They say, "It takes a village," and our village extends to our manufacturers, customers and hard-working employees who have helped us to "fight the fight." Most importantly, I am grateful to my family who supported Premier and me through it all.

**BIR: Speaking of family, I know that your**



*Premier Beauty Supply's President Steve Cohn is a fighter—whether he's boxing to relieve stress or fighting to ensure his business bounced back stronger than ever after almost losing it all.*

**son, Alex, works with you. What is his role?**

**SC:** Alex has been with Premier for eight years, learning the business from the ground up. He started in purchasing, then worked as a DSC, next as a brand manager, then as our sales manager for the Chicago Market.

Today, Alex serves as our director of marketing. Our brand managers and our

marketing and education teams all report to him. He works closely with our manufacturers and supports our sales team with key accounts. There is nothing better than working every day with one of your children! I am very proud of his accomplishments.

**BIR: How do you set Premier apart from other distributors in your market?**

**SC:** To our customers, we offer brands that are new in the marketplace and fill a need for the salons. Orders received by 4:30 p.m. CST/5:30 p.m. EST always ship the same day. We have next-day delivery in most of our territory. That helps the salons' cash flow and keeps their inventory balanced.

Since we do not have stores, we put our energies into our online store. More than 85% of our orders are placed online. This gives our sales team the ability to spend quality time with their customers, focusing on education, what's new, marketing plans and how we can support their businesses.

We are a family-owned business like most of our customers. People ask what our culture is. I always tell them that we, "Treat everyone like family," and we'll do whatever it takes to ensure they feel that way.

With our vendors, we are very transparent and share information that helps them succeed in our territory. Our marketing and education teams work closely with them to create programs to grow our mutual business.

**BIR: You staged a huge exhibit at America's Beauty Show in 2018 for the first time in many years. How did you reach that decision? How do you rate your results?**

**SC:** ABS is owned by the local hairdressers. Without their support, we would never have made it to 30 years. It was the perfect venue for us to show everyone what we're about and thank our customers.

Taking a non-traditional approach, we had no cash-and-carry sales. Instead, our team took orders on tablets and shipped them from our warehouse. We didn't know what to expect, but we were very happy with the results—not only in sales, but in the positive response to our exhibit area.

We are talking with **Cosmetologists Chicago**, which produces ABS, about exhibiting in 2019. We plan to have a bigger presence and make changes to improve the attendee experience in our Booth/VIP Room. Stay tuned!

**BIR: What is hot in your marketplace?**

**SC:** As the cost of doing business continues to rise, salon owners are looking at new revenue streams to help grow their businesses. In addition to hair color and retail products, they are adding services and products like smoothing treatments, masks, hair extensions, bond builders, products and services that address anti-aging, hair loss and other categories.

**BIR: How do you stay on top of technology?**

**SC:** It seems like every year, we have a technology-based focus. In the past four years, we have changed our ERP system, implemented an online store and education portal and armed our sales team with Surface tablets. Then, two years later, we switched to iPads. This year, we are adding a CRM platform for the sales team, implementing a new cloud-based file sharing program for the company and computerizing our warehouse receiving area. Our goals through technology are to make Premier easy to do business with and ensure that we have the information available to set up our team to succeed.

**BIR: Are you seeking new brands? If so, what are your criteria?**

**SC:** We are always open-minded to new opportunities. Our criteria are simple: The new brand/product must support independent salons, have a good support system in place for both salons and Premier, set realistic expectations for the marketplace and, most importantly, I want to be able to call the owner of the company, and if I don't reach him/her, I receive a call back in a reasonable amount of time. We are a relationship-driven company and need to feel connected to our business



*The salon business is about family, and Steve was delighted to welcome his son, Alex, into the business to work by his side. At America's Beauty Show, salon owners, stylists, artists and special guests signed the booth's walls, wishing Premier a happy thirtieth anniversary!*

partners.

**BIR: How do/will you compete with Amazon and other online product distributors?**

**SC:** There is always a new threat to the professional beauty business. In the '90s, it was diversion. In the 2000s, we faced big-box stores. Now, it's online selling and Amazon. You must change your business model constantly to stay ahead—and we do. We are partnering with a third party to help salons compete in the BTC space and will launch the initiative later this year.

**BIR: What's next?**

**SC:** We are currently hiring two marketing managers—one for our service-focused brands and one for our retail-focused brands to support our growth. They will both report to Alex. They will work closely with our manufacturers in strategic planning, managing our brand managers and working closely with our Purchasing and Marketing departments.

In 2019, we will add about seven account executives in new territories and continue to grow our marketing and education departments to support our customers.

**BIR: Where do you see the future of our rapidly changing industry going, especially distribution?**

**SC:** In the past three years, I have seen the business change more than I have over the previous 27. Consolidation—both on the manufacturer and distribution levels—direct selling by manufacturers; technology, big-box stores and different channels of selling to consumers are all factors.

One of Premier's biggest assets over the years has been our ability to change and re-invent ourselves continuously. Sometimes it was by choice and other times, not so much. Our core values have always stayed the same—we just modified them with the times. Today, we are focused on how best to service the Millennial stylists/salon owners, while continuing to meeting the needs of our long-time customers who have supported us over the years.

**BIR: What would our readers would be surprised to learn about you?**

**SC:** I've been married for 32 years. Alex has a twin sister, Jorie, who is married, and I am proud to say that we now have a 2½-year-old grandson. We also have another son, Tony, who is our youngest.

I played basketball my entire life. When I turned 40, I gave it up for boxing, as it was easier on my body. Since then, I've been an avid boxer. It certainly helps get me through those difficult days at work!

**BIR: What inspires you?**

**SC:** I think very highly of a podcast called "Side Door." It tells interesting stories about different exhibits at the Smithsonian that you would never know about. I'm partial, as my son, Tony, is the host!

I am most motivated/inspired when I go to events within our industry and have the opportunity to speak with other distributors and exchange best practices. I always come back fired up with great ideas. I enjoy hearing others' success stories.

To learn more, contact Steve Cohn, president, Premier Beauty Supply, at 847-612-2937 or [scohn@pbsupply.com](mailto:scohn@pbsupply.com). Visit [premierbeautysupply.com](http://premierbeautysupply.com).