



“SHARON IS FEARLESS,
FUNNY, ETHICAL,
COMMITTED AND
CREATIVE. HE HAS GRIT
AND HE DOES NOT REST;
HE LOVES THIS BUSINESS
AND IT SHOWS.”
DEBBIE ABERGEL

Sharon Eyal, CEO of
Counselor Top 40
supplier ETS Express.

Photograph by Shlomo Cohen

With an unflinching focus, unwavering integrity and more than his fair share of unrepentant audaciousness, the CEO of ETS Express spent the good part of this year growing his business, winning awards and showing the rest of the industry what it's like when you put your money where your mouth is.

By Michele Bell

PERSON OF THE YEAR SHARON EYAL

IN A YEAR THAT FOUND his business dominating the drinkware categories at Counselor's Distributor Choice Awards in January, being named the number-one large company on Counselor's Best Places to Work list as voted on by his 500+ employees in February and, oh yes, crushing the retail company S'well in a massive trademark infringement lawsuit in March – with a unanimous jury win, no less – it's fair to say that Sharon Eyal has more than earned the right to be named the 2018 Counselor Person of the Year. And wowza, is he one hell of a choice.

With swagger and sass for days, no doubt born of the fact that he's an Israeli to his core, trust us when we say that Eyal has never met a challenge he didn't relish. With him, what you see is about as genuine and authentic as it comes, with his ubiquitous phosphorescent-white Stan Smith Adidas sneakers and a Cali street style that prompted one competitor to refer to him this way: “Sharon's just cool – like the Dr. Dre of the industry”; what you get is an intellect so robust and a mouth so formidable that being with him – when he's firing on all cylinders – is like the inside of a Dyson. With him at the helm, the company has amassed nearly 50 patents and trademarks, is the market leader in the drinkware category, sets the standard for customer service and production capabilities and has had a five-year overall growth rate of 97% as ETS encroaches on \$100 million in annual sales. And now we invite you to consider this: Sharon Eyal never graduated high school.

Learning From the Ground Up

Eyal emigrated to the U.S. when he was 9 and his sister, Taly – ETS's CFO – was 11. By his own admission he was shy at first, because he only spoke Hebrew and wasn't yet fluent in English. For those who know him, the thought of Sharon Eyal as an introvert is, well, jaw-dropping. His dad, Ely, founded ETS (the initials refer to their names: Ely, Taly and Sharon) in 1985, and Sharon began working at the company part-time when he was 16, deciding then to leave school at 17 and get his GED. He started full-time at the company at 18, doing everything from washing mugs and unpacking shipments to loading and unloading trucks, driving a forklift and running printing equipment. “I have to give it to my dad,” Eyal says. “He didn't want me relying on anyone, and always believed that if I was going to run the company, I needed to work in every role, not just sit in an office. I really commend him for the business values and ethics he gave Taly and me.”

By 1994, he was in his early 20s and running the company, working 20-hour days and showing early on a passion for his work that would help propel the company's sales growth and reputation for doing whatever it takes for its clients. “When I go on sales calls with the team, I'm not nearly as interested in what we've done right as I am in what we could do better – that's where we learn,” Eyal says.

Mae Strehlow, the category manager for drinkware at 4imprint (asi/197045), has been working with Eyal for the past 10 years, since the Top 40 distributor added ETS as a drinkware supplier. “In that category, ETS is a leader for design, imprints and customer service due in large part to Sharon's leadership,” she says. “He's developed one of the best teams in the industry, and he's become like family to me.”

Taly Eyal, who, like Sharon, has never worked anywhere but ETS, has a unique view on what makes him tick. “When he was younger and first starting out, he was even more of a handful – if you can believe that,” she says, laughing. “He definitely got the energy gene in the family.” Because the Eyal's own ETS outright, they're not beholden to a holding company or board to dictate decisions or strategy, which, as Taly says, affords them great freedom. “We have unconditional trust between us and Sharon is always thinking outside the box and thinking big. He has a very specific vision for the company and he's always considering new processes, new techniques ... nothing is impossible and if it seems that way, he'll figure out a way around it. His passion, without question, is the company and the people who work here.”

“Ride or Die”

To understand Eyal, you have to look at the way he interacts with his team, who are bound by a strong *esprit de corps* of having gone through so much together, and for whom, he's fond of saying, he has a “ride or die” mentality. And they return the sentiment, as evidenced by the overwhelming votes they cast to put ETS on this year's Counselor Best Places to Work list. He's also single-minded when it comes to steering the direction of the company.