



WE LOVE **Inc.** Entrepreneurs we

Think of this page as an invitation: "The writers of *Inc.* magazine cordially invite you to meet 26* of the world's most fascinating entrepreneurs...." We believe you will love them (as we do) for their inspiring stories, their clever ideas, and their respectful treatment of customers and employees. Join us in celebrating these remarkable individuals.

* Why do we love 26 entrepreneurs, you ask? Because with the April issue, *Inc.* celebrates its 26th birthday, and birthdays put us in an affectionate mood.

Warren Brown | Diane von Furstenberg | Michael Dell | Frank Robinson | Julie Azuma | Michelle Cardinal & Tim O'Leary
Craig Newmark | Ray Kurzweil | Katrina Markoff | Barry Steinberg & Craig Sumerel | Chuck Porter | Victoria Parham
Trip Hawkins | Jim Sinegal | Tom LaTour | Martha Stewart | Fritz Maytag | Mitchell Gold & Bob Williams | Izzy & Coco
Tihanyi | Jack Mitchell | Tony Lee | Mark Melton | Rueben Martinez | Mike Lazaridis | Muriel Siebert | Richard Branson



Because he is Edison's rightful heir

RAY KURZWEIL

Company:
Kurzweil
Technologies and
other companies

Location: Boston

Industry:
Technology

AT AGE 17, Ray Kurzweil appeared on TV's *I've Got A Secret* with Steve Allen. His secret? The piece of music he played had been composed entirely by a

computer he invented. That early acclaim only hinted at the remarkable body of invention that Kurzweil would establish over the next four decades. "I'm excited by the link between dry formulas on a blackboard and people's lives," he says.

Starting in 1974, Kurzweil invented in rapid succession a device that recognized printed text; the flatbed scanner; and then a way for machines to connect text to a recorded voice. Combining all three technologies, he developed the Kurzweil Reading Machine to assist the blind. His first customer was Stevie Wonder, who called the reading machine "a breakthrough that changed my life."

Kurzweil sold that business to Xerox in 1980, and then he and Wonder collaborated on a music synthesizer (the partners and the product are shown, above, in 1986) that could replicate the rich tonality of a grand piano and other orchestral instruments. He sold that business in 1990. Now Kurzweil, 57, is working on technology to help hedge funds execute trades based on instantaneous readings of the market.

Though they may seem wildly eclectic, Kurzweil's businesses rely on one basic theme: pattern recognition. "I gather as much data as I can to develop patterns at every different level," he says. Kurzweil's ability to channel that notion into great businesses, time and time again, is itself a pretty remarkable pattern. —Adam Hanft



For setting a completely unreasonable goal for her business

KATRINA MARKOFF

Company:
Vosges
Haut-Chocolat

Location:
Chicago

Industry:
Chocolates

"BRINGING PEACE TO THE WORLD through chocolate is a pretty big mantra," admits Katrina Markoff, the founder of Vosges Haut-Chocolat, a Chicago business with \$4.5 million in annual sales. "But it can do that by introducing different cultures and points of view." To that end, the typical box of Vosges truffles mixes exotic flavors from all over the globe, including Japanese wasabi, Italian taleggio cheese, and Mexican ancho chili. In Markoff's mind, you can't help but think about tribal lands in northeast India as you savor her curry-coconut Naga truffle.

Markoff, 32, developed her "We are the World" philosophy of chocolate while studying classical cooking at the Cordon Bleu in France and later, when she apprenticed under Spanish chef Ferran Adria, who is celebrated for taking culinary risks. She then spent nine months traveling the world and tasting all manner of foods, from worms to kaffir limes to white poppy seed. Returning to the U.S., she took a job at her uncle's home-furnishings catalog business to learn about vendor-buyer relationships, photo styling, and copywriting. She opened her first retail shop in Chicago in 1998 with a loan backed by the Small Business Administration, and started selling chocolates at specialty food stores and Neiman Marcus a year later.

Today there are Vosges stores in New York City and Las Vegas (Japan is next) and 30 employees on the payroll. And Markoff still maintains that her chocolate can save the world. She credits her mother, who runs a hazardous waste removal company and who taught her to add receipts at an early age, for encouraging her to set audacious goals: "She always said, 'You just have to do it. There are no limitations.'" —Stephanie Clifford

For showing the power of the peer group

BARRY STEINBERG & CRAIG SUMEREL

Companies:
Direct Tire and
Auto Service and
Bob Sumerel Tire
& Service

Locations:
Watertown, Mass.,
and Cincinnati

Industry: Tire retail

FIVE YEARS AGO Barry Steinberg, 59, and Craig Sumerel, 38, both successful tire retailers, ran into each other in the lobby at Pirelli. They traded war stories, griped a bit, and realized that they had so much in common that they ought to talk more regularly. That chance encounter has grown into the National Retail Tire Network, a 12-member peer group that meets for two days three times a year. "We have 275 locations, sell 3 million tires a year, employ 5,000 people, and have revenue of \$500 million," says Steinberg (above right). Some manufacturers have offered the group a bulk discount, and the Tire Industry Association's PAC coordinator spoke at a recent meeting after a presentation on a new trend: filling tires with nitrogen instead of air. Group members, who hail from far-flung markets, could never command as much attention on their own. Besides the recognition, members gladly pay \$1,200 in annual dues to be less isolated. "I can call up a competitor down the street, but we're guarded with one another," Steinberg says. In the peer group, everything's out in the open, even financials. —Donna Fenn

