Steven Heller has always been very passionate about helping his clients build their brands. During his 25-year career in licensing and business development, he has worked with licensors and licensees both large and small on deals including fashion brands, sports, character and entertainment properties, and has helped his clients secure programs at major retailers such as Macy’s, Target, Walmart, QVC, Hot Topic, Michaels, Jo-Ann’s and David’s Bridal, among others.

In late 2011, Heller created a new vehicle for his passion when he founded The Brand Liaison, a New York-Miami based licensing and brand management agency. The company just celebrated its fifth anniversary. “We’ve been able to attract very strong brands, because we have a team of all-star, experienced licensing veterans that deliver results,” Heller says of his company’s success over the past five years. “And the proof is in our performance. Just look at the deals we have done and the testimonials we’ve received from our clients.”
Apparel is the cornerstone to almost all successful licensing programs.

The Brand Liaison team brings experience and excitement for licensing and that’s reflected throughout the organization. “Everyone on our team brings tremendous energy and passion to what we do, and we are all extremely diligent and dedicated,” says Heller.

The Brand Liaison’s Karen Diamond explains: “The first step in creating licensing deals is the transfer of enthusiasm — when the other party shares our passion and belief in the program. From there, we ensure the parties share the same vision for the brand, including product ideation and distribution channels.”

Like Diamond, all of The Brand Liaison’s staff members have more than 15 to 20 years of licensing experience. “And some of my partners have been in this business for many more years than they’re willing to admit,” jokes Heller.

A Wide Reach
The Brand Liaison distinguishes itself from many of its peers through the diversity of its portfolio. “There are definitely other good agencies out there, and many of them are our friends,” Heller says. “However, I’m not aware of any other boutique licensing agency that has the breadth of experience that we do – whether in fashion, home goods, gifts, celebrity properties, art, professional sports and many other areas.”

In addition to representing brands, the company works on behalf of several manufacturers. “For the most part, we like to represent brands and build their outbound licensing programs, but we also often work with manufacturers to help them acquire a brand that we don’t represent,” Heller says. “One of the largest deals I have ever worked on was helping a client secure the rights for Sesame Street apparel for more than $100 million. Last year we did a very large deal for a client to acquire the NFL rights for apparel.” Over the years, The Brand Liaison and its team have negotiated licenses for brands such as Disney, Warner Brothers, Skechers, Nautica and many others.

Featured Properties
Brand Liaison will show off all of its properties and the full range of its experience and capabilities when it attends the Licensing Expo event, taking place from May 23 to May 25 at the Mandalay Bay Convention Center in Las Vegas. This is the sixth consecutive year Heller and others from the company have had a major presence at the event. The Licensing Expo will give The Brand Liaison the opportunity to spotlight its work in its three largest licensing categories: fashion, celebrities and art.

Iconic Fashion
The Brand Liaison is considered to be a leading agency in the area of fashion licensing, one of the largest licensing sectors. At Licensing Expo it will feature iconic brand names such as Gloria Vanderbilt, Laura Ashley L.e.i., as well as newer brands such as Felina, Romeo+Juliet Couture, MacBeth Collection and JACHS NY.

“Apart from being the cornerstone to almost all successful licensing programs,” Heller says. “We have created a very strong niche in the licensing industry for licensing iconic fashion brands on both the brand and manufacturer side.”

The Celebrity Effect
The Brand Liaison’s celebrity licensing roster includes television personalities Jon Taffer, a hospitality industry icon and host of “Bar Rescue”; chef Robert Irvine of “Restaurant Impossible”; branding expert and investor Daymond John of “Shark Tank”; magician Michael Carbonaro of “The
Carbonaro Effect”; dress designer Sondra Celli of “My Big Fat American Greek Wedding”; home and pet designer Antonio Ballatore of “Animal House” and syndicated cooking host Howard “Mr. Food” Rosenthal, plus YouTube Superstars LaurDIY and Captain Sparklez.

“With so many channels and television programming today, plus the power of the Internet, there is a base of celebrities that have created a very strong brand identity in their specific field,” Heller says. “We have developed an expertise in taking that core brand identity and carrying it over to consumer products through licensing.”

Heller will co-host “How to Create an Entertainment Licensing Program from Scratch” during the Licensing Expo.

### Art Licensing

The company’s art licensing runs the gamut from modern to classic, cartoon to photography and bright and colorful pop art. Its art clients include designer Debra Valencia (see sidebar), international design house Turnowsky and cartoonists Mary Engelbreit and Gary Patterson, and this year they are introducing emoji icons from EmojiOne and collegiate artist Cory Paige.

All of these artists’ work can be found on a variety of licensed products, including stationery and home goods.

“I have always
been attracted to bright and colorful art, as everyone in this industry knows from my colorful jackets,” Heller jokes. “More importantly, I know how successful art licensing can be with the right property. Our licensing partners have created incredible products at retail, generating millions of dollars with our art brands.”

**A Novel Approach**

The Brand Liaison believes in taking a creative approach to the licensing of all of its brands, regardless of the category. “The biggest challenge facing our industry today is the contracting shelf space at retailers – many of the department store chains are disappearing, and many of the remaining players are contracting and closing some of their doors,” Heller says. “We have to find new retail outlets and alternative distribution channels to the traditional department store model, whether that means e-commerce, off-price stores, club stores or specialty stores.”

As a result, the company has helped its clients and licensees focus on creating ongoing programs with off-price, club, and specialty stores. One example is Michaels, which has featured successful end-cap programs for Brand Liaison client Debra Valencia as well as Jo-Ann’s for the Ugly Christmas Sweater brand, whose “beautifully ugly” designs can be seen on stationery and other products. The Brand Liaison is currently exploring opportunities for YouTube superstar Lauren Riihimaki, better known as LaurDIY, for her licensed crafting and other DIY products.