



# Downtime: The man behind MTV's Moonman



by Michael del Castillo , Technology & Innovation Editor  
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Tonight, hundreds of pop music stars and groupies will gather in Los Angeles at the [MTV Video Music Awards](#) to see who will take home one of its iconic moonman trophies. But for David Moritz, it doesn't really matter who wins—his attention will be on the statues themselves.

Moritz is the founder of Society Awards, which not only manufactures MTV's trophies, but also makes the Emmys, the Espys, the JD Power & Associates Awards and dozens of other elite prizes. The 30-year-old runs his office from a Warhol-style factory building in Queens, New York, with enough space for an industrial laser etching machine, a studio to design original works of art, a full bar, and a rooftop farm overlooking the Manhattan cityscape.

A few weeks ago, Moritz and I sat down in his office and cracked open a bottle of Michel Moritz 2006 champagne, "Noblesse," yet another of his ventures, in anticipation of the VMA's. He set out explaining to me just exactly how a five-year-old company founded on \$90,000 in loans from his grandfather, had managed to reach a \$3.4 million valuation, and near total control of the U.S. elite awards market.

"First, we're a customer-service organization,"



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Society Awards founder David Moritz stands in front of a trophy case filled with trophies representing many of the United States' most prestigious achievements. Society Awards

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Moritz said as he sipped from the \$220 bottle decorated with electroplated gold, the same technology used on many of his trophies. The end-result of such service is a trophy worthy of being showcased on the mantle's of some of today's biggest stars, but Moritz said so much more goes into it from the company's perspective. "It's logistics, turnaround time, storage, inventory, job shipping, the whole customer experience—making everything easy for the customer, finding out ways to figure out everything they do and make that better in every way.... That leads to collaboration. That leads to a deep close relationship with the customers."

Moritz, who studied both law and business, at one time wanted to be an entertainment lawyer. But while interning at a law firm he found himself continually gravitating to the business side. His life changed forever when a friend introduced him to the idea of "deal toys"—cheesy, plastic trophies coveted by many in the finance and banking worlds for their symbolic representation of what are often multi-billion dollar deals.

"You go into their office and you see all these pieces of plastic on their shelves that shows all the deals they've worked on," Moritz told me. "You see a forest of deal toys, or as they used to be called, tombstones," because they often symbolized the death of a company.

After a failed attempt to partner with his friend in the deal toy business, Moritz decided to strike out on his own in 2007 with the help of a rather unusual investor, his 87-year-old grandfather, Arthur David Weiss.

Weiss made a fortune investing in Florida swampland on which the town of Miramar, Pembroke Pines, and Gainesville now sit, said Moritz. But not one to spoil his grandson, he made David fight for \$90,000 in loans dispersed in \$20,000 increments—but only after he saw the business model showing signs of success.

So with the idea to make high-end trophies, Moritz did what any entrepreneur just out of law school might do: he picked up a stack of manufacturing textbooks and taught himself how to make the MTV Video Music Awards, which since 1984 have been honoring innovative music videos with a trophy of an astronaut walking on the moon.

He says he's still learning, and he's making the factories he employees keep up with new tricks as well. Together the partners invent innovative ways of combining silver with cast-iron, or gold with marble, or bronze with crystal.

What's his secret to success? I asked him. How did a Gen Y aspiring entertainment lawyer with no metal-working or stone-cutting experience end up with such an edge in the U.S. elite trophies market?

Moritz' response: "Having a basic, and continually developing understanding of the factory—and to work with factory owners to solve problems. Don't just back off," he said. "But keep pushing until we get the result we're looking for."

And yet it's not just the quality of the finished product Moritz says he's interested in. He wants to maximize value to his clients as well.

For those clients with a multi-year agreement with Society Awards, a typical electroplated gold statue of approximately 15 inches and of medium intricacy, such as an Emmy, will cost between \$300 and \$500 per unit with a \$10,000-\$20,000 modeling mold fee. But unlike a typical mom-and-pop trophy shop, says Moritz, Society Awards earns a set commission. If customers want to spend a \$1,000 for each trophy, they will get value proportionately, whether by increasing the intricacy, upgrading the material, building a velvet-lined box, or any number of upgrades.

When his company secured the contract to manufacture the MTV Video Music Awards in 2008, Moritz says he and his team created a new take on the figure. Among the changes: the

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moon man's fist stretches forward to make it look "more definitively like an astronaut," the casting process was revamped with thicker molds and materials, and a new plating process was implemented using rhodium-nickel alloy.

Society Awards has grown revenues by 50 percent each year since its founding, and last year took in **\$2.5 million**. The company now has 14 employees and is worth \$3.4 million, plenty to pay off his grandfather. On Moritz's list of things still to do is win the contracts to make the trophies for the Pulitzer Prizes and the Academy Awards.

When our talk about his business was done, I asked Moritz what else he does for fun, other than drink champagne in his office. He told me he often ends up clubbing, but doesn't really enjoy it all that much.

"Some people talk about work hard, play hard," he said. "But for me, it's more work hard, work hard."

[Click here for a sneak peek inside the Society Awards offices, and details of the trophies.](#)



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Michael earned his BA from Mercer University, along the way excavating a Roman bathhouse with the American School of Archaeology. Plus, he provided security at Oxford University, where he also studied literature and philosophy. He earned his MS from Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism while training for and running in the New York marathon.

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