



The Influential Entrepreneurs of 2026

K.H. Koehler | Contributor

Success in entrepreneurship continues to evolve as markets, technologies, and consumer expectations change. Influential entrepreneurs are those who adapt thoughtfully, make informed decisions, and build businesses with a clear sense of direction. Their work reflects a practical approach to growth and influence, shaping how success is understood across industries.



Renee Lee

Renee Lee, CEO and Chief Brand Strategist of ABR FIRM, brings a thoughtful approach to leadership. A recognized leadership expert and personal brand architect, Renee believes that true leadership isn't about titles, it's about the capacity to care, connect, and coach others to greatness. Through her proprietary Care.Connect.Coach. framework, she helps executives, teams, and high-achieving women lead with empathy, clarity, and accountability.

Her journey to entrepreneurship began after a defining career moment when the nonprofit program she directed lost its funding. Rather than be limited by

circumstance, Renee turned the challenge into an opportunity, becoming her own first client.

From that pivot, [ABR FIRM](#) was born: a Memphis-rooted, family-led leadership and brand development company with global reach. The firm equips organizations to build capacity, elevate culture, and create sustainable success through strategic coaching, communication training, and leadership development.

For Renee, great leadership isn't just about better systems; it's about building belief in the people running them. Her influence has earned her recognition as a Top 15 Coach in the Memphis MSA.

Through her upcoming book, *Leadership at Every Level*, and her platform *Women In Position*, Renee continues to champion the message that leadership isn't confined to the corner office, it begins wherever you are, when you choose to lead with care, courage, confidence, and conviction.



Diane Gilman

In an industry that often sidelines women past a certain age, [Diane Gilman](#) stands as one of fashion's most unexpected and influential figures in the fashion space. Known to thousands of women as the "Queen of Jeans," she transformed her own frustration at age 60 into one of the most successful denim movements in tele-retail history. Her creation of the DG2 jean, engineered specifically for the middle-aged female body, did more than disrupt a youth-obsessed industry. It resonated with women seeking representation and thoughtful design.

Since launching DG2 in 2005, Diane has sold nearly millions of pairs of jeans and built a fashion brand with significant market presence, an achievement that remains notable in the industry. DG2 resonated because

Gilman spoke directly to women who felt left behind. Through design that honored real bodies and messaging that celebrated real lives, she grew a denim line that fostered a strong customer community.

Across her career, Diane has collected major accolades, MS NOW's "50 Over 50" initiative along with many industry awards earned through her reign on HSN and QVC. Today, her bestselling books and increasingly influential podcasts, like *Fashion Thursdays with Diane*, *Too Young To Be Old*, and *The 80/40 Factor*, continue her work of inspiring women over 50 to rewrite what's possible.

Now reaching over 85,000 Instagram followers and more than 10,000 YouTube subscribers, Diane continues to deliver a message of hope: midlife can be the most meaningful chapter of all. To her audience, she encourages women to explore new possibilities at every stage of life.



Amy Suzanne Upchurch

Long before her work became a recognized wellness company, [Amy Suzanne Upchurch](#)'s journey had already begun. It started in a hospital room, as she pushed through fear and exhaustion during a pregnancy complicated by hyperemesis gravidarum and a life-threatening blood infection. What stayed with her was not a lack of medical care, but a pattern she witnessed repeatedly: women's health concerns were too often minimized or dismissed. That realization led to a quiet but resolute decision, to create the solutions she couldn't find.

Starting a company was never part of the plan. Yet amid military life, newborn schedules, and frequent medical appointments, the pull to create meaningful support for women became impossible to ignore. With no formal business training, she turned her garage on a military base into a workspace and began developing products grounded in what she had learned firsthand: simple, transparent formulations designed with women's bodies and real needs in mind.

What began as a small operation driven by conviction has grown into a comprehensive women's wellness company shaped by lived experience. The product line now addresses key phases of women's health, from monthly cycles and fertility through pregnancy and menopause. While milestones such as WBENC certification and national growth mark important progress, Amy says her greatest accomplishment has been understanding the broader influence a company can have, internally, by creating room for women to grow into leadership, and externally, by offering products women can trust and use daily.

At its core, her work is defined by service. Through initiatives such as the Pain to Purpose Award and the Fight Back Award, Amy continues to support women navigating difficult seasons. The company also partners with women's shelters, crisis organizations, and military families, extending the same empathy that first shaped its mission.

Amy's story was never about building a business. It was about answering a calling allowing hardship to shape something purposeful and lasting. Through each product and initiative, her work reflects a belief that even the most difficult seasons can be used for good.

Dr. Sudip Bose, M.D.

[Dr. Sudip Bose, M.D.](#), has built his career around creating practical solutions in healthcare, developing companies that move the system forward, deliver measurable results, and scale without losing their purpose. His work reflects a builder's mindset shaped by years in emergency medicine and sharpened further during his military service, where decisiveness and clarity weren't optional—they were the difference between success and failure.



Dr. Bose's entrepreneurial track record began with a simple idea: clinicians needed better tools to prepare for their boards and licensing exams. What started as one platform quickly grew into a family of educational technology companies that reached profitability unusually fast.

More importantly, these platforms helped countless medical professionals strengthen their knowledge and pass the exams required to care for patients. Hospitals and training programs across the country utilize Dr. Bose's companies to raise pass rates and onboard stronger, more confident clinicians.

Dr. Bose didn't stop there. He helped launch DrB.ai, a national telehealth service now active in all 50 states. In his advisory role, he guides clinical strategy and helps shape the patient experience, with a focus on affordability, safety, and accessibility.

Dr. Bose's leadership extends far beyond technology and clinical practice. He is one of the nation's most requested corporate speakers, represented by the top speaking bureaus for keynotes on leadership under pressure. He brings lessons from military combat, emergency medicine, and crisis response to Fortune 500 companies, government agencies, and global organizations. His experience shaping systems, managing risk under pressure, and scaling mission-driven enterprises positions him as a trusted strategic voice for organizations navigating complex healthcare and workforce challenges.

His commitment to veterans continues to guide much of his work. He advises Bridge My Return, a national platform helping military veterans transition successfully into the civilian job market. He is the founder of The Battle Continues, a charity that supports injured veterans and directs one hundred percent of donations to those in need.

On the media side, viewers can watch Dr. Bose on Desert Doc, the award-winning medical documentary series on Amazon Prime that offers an uncommon look into emergency care in some of the most challenging environments in the country. His insights have also been featured in national outlets including CNN, FOX, NBC, ABC, and the Washington Post.

What makes Dr. Bose stand out isn't only the reach or profitability of his companies, but the intent behind them. He builds solutions to real problems: workforce shortages, uneven access to care, gaps in education, and public confusion about medicine. Each venture reflects a blend of frontline practicality, strategic thinking, and a commitment to service that has defined his entire career. At every stage, he has focused on one mission, to build systems that serve people and strengthen the communities that rely on them.



Nikki Taylor

As the founder of Italy Property Consulting and [La Dolce Vita Lifestyle Magazine](#), Nikki Taylor established a specialized role in the Italian property market: the steady, bilingual voice who stands between overseas buyers and a market that too often hides its risks behind romance.

Nikki's decade-long presence in Italy has been defined by hands-on experience across acquisitions, legal navigation, and negotiations. Backed by a professional foundation in financial planning and banking, she approaches property as a structured investment as much as a lifestyle choice. That dual perspective has become the cornerstone of Italy Property Consulting's evolution into more sophisticated, investment-led projects.

[Italy Property Consulting](#) is entering a defining new phase. In 2026, the firm will enter a new chapter with the addition of Lou Pomponio as a business partner. An Australian property developer and consultant, Lou brings more than 25 years of experience delivering boutique, high-end projects for international and high-net-worth investors.

Lou brings deep expertise in feasibility analysis, design-led redevelopment, and capital structuring across global markets. His career has been shaped by identifying underutilised assets and transforming them into high-performing, investment-grade properties. This partnership marks a major step forward for Italy Property Consulting. By combining Nikki's on-the-ground market intelligence with Lou's development and investor expertise, the firm is expanding its scope of opportunity across Italy. The focus now extends to strategic development and investment-grade projects designed for performance, scale, and lasting value.

The firm is focused on Tuscany, Puglia, and Sicily, landscapes where timeless architecture meets global desire and lifestyle dreams. By combining Nikki's meticulous, buyer-first approach with Lou's strategic development expertise, Italy Property Consulting elevates

every project into an opportunity with both soul and scale. The partnership is creating a platform where historic charm and high-yield potential converge like never before.

The executive collaboration between Nikki and Lou marks a new era for Italy Property Consulting, one that extends beyond advisory services into shaping the Italian property market itself. Their mission remains rooted in clarity and strategy, but together they are creating a platform with greater reach, stronger ambition, and enduring value for international buyers.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/special/contributor-content/2026/01/23/the-influential-entrepreneurs-of-2026/88324700007/>