

# VISTAGE

## Member *Stories*

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John Bruellman, CEO  
Sign-Zone  
Minneapolis

### *At a glance*

*Role:* CEO

*Industry:* Manufacturing

*Employees:* 350

*Vistage chair:* Brian Davis

### **Company background**

*[Sign-Zone](#) is a diversified manufacturing company operating three legal entities: Showdown Displays, Creative Displays and Victory Corps. The family-owned company has 350 permanent employees.*

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As you watch the endless convoy of parade floats drift by during your hometown's July 4 parade, ask yourself, "How did all these floats come together?" Some, believe it or not, were designed and assembled using float kits manufactured by a triad of Minneapolis-based brands. The brands, or operating entities, are Showdown Displays, Creative Displays and Victory Corps. For efficiency reasons, CEO John Bruellman oversees all three brands with a single executive team under a company named Sign-Zone.

John said the floats are a "very small piece" of the company's business, with the bulk of Sign-Zone's revenue coming from portable, lightweight displays and signage.



Through its three brands, Sign-Zone sells directly to wholesalers or distributors, which in turn, sell to consumers. "We don't even want our customers to find the Sign-Zone website," said John. "We go to market as Showdown Displays, Creative Displays and Victory Corps."

"We don't do direct sales to the consumers. We're serving a number of different reseller markets who include the promotional products industry, sign shops, sign franchises, marketing agencies and the print industry, which includes printers, and any company who is willing to resell displays and signage," explained John. The company's product development group is prolific—releasing 50–60 new products a year. Product innovation keeps Sign-Zone out in front of the competition.

### **Manufacturing efficiency**

A single manufacturing facility churns out products for each brand. And John's executive team manages all three entities—eschewing the need for duplicate and expensive leadership hierarchies. His five-member team includes a VP of sales and marketing, VP of product management,

a CFO, VP of operations and a VP of HR. The family-owned, private company employs 350 permanent people, expanding to 400 for seasonal rush periods.

John said his industry is fragmented, with challenges coming from numerous competitors, most of whom with expertise in niche products. Sign-Zone competes with what it calls “legendary customer experiences plus great products.” John said, “The two most important things to all of our customer bases, when you ask them, is product quality and customer service.”

He confesses that the idea of competing on service is a marketing cliché. Where Sign-Zone is different, however, is how it adds value at several waypoints along the customer’s journey. John’s team makes it easy for their customers to work with the company. Sign-Zone customers like the fact the company understands their needs and can help them make money when reselling Sign-Zone products. “Our customers like how we have their backs,” John explained.

Quite a few people, in fact, like how Sign-Zone operates its business. The company has won several awards, including Manufacturer of the Year in 2014 by Minneapolis/St. Paul Business Journal (MSPBJ). John was also named MSPBJ Executive of the Year in 2014. The award goes to an industry leader who has made major accomplishments in Minnesota’s manufacturing industry.

The most important award for John is the industry’s Distributor Choice award, a distinction Sign-Zone has won often. “We’ve won that award now eight times. That’s when your customers vote on the best partner in a specific product area.”

## Getting “traction” through Vistage

John first learned about Vistage three years ago when he was referred to chair [Brian Davis](#). He was looking for an opportunity to learn new ideas to help his company and Vistage was the answer. “I liked the sound of Vistage; I liked the educational component of it and I clicked with Brian,” he shared.

Improvements to John’s business came quickly as a result of his involvement with Vistage. “I was introduced to Traction (the Entrepreneurial Operating System) through Vistage. It’s a very good execution model, and that’s what we use it for,” he shared. With so many Vistage members embracing the business system, they’ve all developed a shared understanding of the Traction processes. Shared stories help everyone in the group.

When combined with lessons learned from nationally-known speakers, John has experienced improvements to his company in several areas, including revenue growth and operations management. It was hard for him to choose which speakers provided the most value, but when pressed, he cited economist Brian Beaulieu of ITR Economics as an expert whose advice has influenced his company’s direction. He said there are “many more” speakers who have helped him.

“I think the primary thing for me,” shared John, “Is Vistage has been a good forum for some unfiltered feedback, not only in business decisions, but how you come across to others, how you process information, and how you make decisions,” he shared.

Some of that unfiltered feedback from other Vistage members dissuaded him from consolidating his company’s brands, which would have sidetracked John from focusing on far more critical

issues. “Group members told me ‘you have bigger fish to fry.’” Because of examples like this, John’s Vistage group has become his de facto advisers. “I just really enjoy my group. I’ve made some fantastic friendships; and, I respect the people very much,” he said.

### **“Brian’s a fantastic chair”**

John has equal praise for Vistage chair, Brian. He said, “Brian’s a fantastic chair, very good for our group and in the group setting. I think he keeps us on task. I really respect what he does,” adding, “Where that’s been valuable for me is Brian’s background in organizational psychology.”

He also credits Brian with working hard to keep his Vistage members engaged with activities and events that provide unusual and memorable learning experiences. John cites last year’s trip to the US Army Military Academy at West Point for a three-day executive retreat to strengthen leadership skills. The trip to West Point was somewhat of a homecoming for John, who was once a cadet himself, on a path to becoming an armor officer.

This spring (2015), several of Brian’s group members are preparing for yet another remarkable trip. This time the destination is Cuba, where the group will explore the country’s economy, culture and trade opportunities. For Brian’s members, activities such as these are reminders why they devote the time and energy to the Vistage experience.

For executives considering whether or not they have the time to stay involved in a group like Vistage, John has some sage advice: “If you don’t think you have the time to participate, then that is exactly why you should do it.”

“You do need to step out of your business each

month so that you can work on increasing the value of your business; it helps you to be more efficient. You need to work on things at a higher level,” he urged.

Vistage is all about learning, observed John, “And if you stop learning, you’re going to wilt on the vine.” **V**