

VISTAGE

Member Stories

Deb Erickson, CEO
The Line Up
Eden Prairie, Minn.

At a glance

Role: CEO/business owner

Industry: Specialty clothing manufacturing and design

Employees: 26–75

Vistage chair: Brian Davis

Company background

Custom-made dance costumes and creative performance apparel have been The Line Up's specialty for more than 25 years. The company provides apparel to more than half of the NFL's and NBA's cheer and dance teams, as well as colleges and high schools across the the country. [The Line Up](#) has 30-40 employees and revenue of \$3 million in FY 2013.

If you've ever been to a home Vikings game and watched the cheerleader squad move through their many dance routines you've seen performance apparel from The Line Up in action. The Line Up supplies cheer and dance apparel to the Vikings as well as more than half of all NFL and NBA teams. CEO and Vistage member Deb Erickson started the company out of her house 25 years ago by sewing workout gear for herself and friends. What started as a home hobby adventure for Deb now employs 30-40 people designing and producing apparel for scores of high school cheer and dance teams, in addition to college and pro teams.



“High school is one of our biggest customer segments,” said Deb. What’s fueled that growth in the past several years was the explosion of dance-line and cheer-squad competitions. And the same goes for collegiate competitions. “It’s not uncommon for high school dancers to go directly to a college team and into professional sports,” she explained.

There are quite a few competitors in this space, but The Line Up has had a significant head-start in the business, which relies heavily on word-of-mouth marketing and customer referrals to grow. The Line Up has an industry reputation for extreme customer service that includes designing and creating garments to very specific customer specs with nearly impossible deadlines. “These are our premier line of garments,” she noted, where prices can be as high as \$600 each.

If this premier line of apparel serves customers who demand high quality and truly distinctive garments, there are thousands of other customers who are more focused on value. These customers are served by The Line Up’s web store where they can select predesigned outfits, but still have some freedom to customize the garments. This is the company’s fastest growing category. “We are growing faster, attracting more customers and we’re doing a better job of managing costs,” Deb said.

Deb also differentiates the firm on technology, “This year we are branding and differentiating through dye-sublimation and specialized embroidery capabilities,” she noted. Deb’s referring to new equipment recently purchased that makes it easy for their customers and designers to produce apparel that’s radically different from what’s available elsewhere. The uniqueness of garments is naturally coveted in the world of competitive dancing and many customers are eager to pay a premium to stand out.

To house all this cutting-edge equipment, Deb moved the company to a new 16,000-square-foot design and production facility in Eden Prairie, Minn.

What’s Vistage?

Deb admitted that she may not have ever heard of Vistage if she hadn’t been sitting next to chair [Brian Davis](#) on a chance flight two years ago. “Brian was reading a leadership book by John Maxwell and I was reading the latest Jim Collins’ book.” A discussion ensued, business cards exchanged and not long after, Deb joined one of Brian’s Key groups. The Key group is designed to meet the needs of CEOs and business leaders at smaller companies.

Deb cites the speakers and Brian as the top two things she likes most about her Vistage experience. “The speaker quality is phenomenal,” she exclaimed. “I look forward every month to the presentations.” Returning to the office following her Vistage group meeting and presentation—she’s always eager to share the meeting content with her team. On numerous occasions, Deb’s brought a staff member with her to hear relevant presentations.

Last month we had a speaker on hiring—the timing was perfect.” Deb continues to hire staff (current staff fluctuates seasonally between 30–40) to keep up with growing demand and she just hired the company’s first full-time sales rep to pursue leads that arrive via its website or who call in. “We’re not into hard sales,” she said, but the sales position will cultivate and develop new business opportunities where they had not looked before.

Through her Vistage peer group Deb met an expert in sales management who coached her on the differences between sales and account management. The advice came at a critical time and helped her bring in the right person to lead the nascent sales team.

Endless resources

The camaraderie from fellow Vistage members in her Key group has helped Deb discover resources that have helped her in growing the business. But by far, she said “Brian has been instrumental in getting me connections with people that have elevated the business to a new level.” She cites a consultant she learned about from Brian who helps growing family-owned companies, as well as other speakers. “The speakers not only help me, but bring others [in my company] to a new level.”

Brian, and her group members, introduced Deb to Traction, the Entrepreneurial Operating System (EOS) for helping leaders better manage their businesses. Traction and Vistage have also conspired to help Deb realize how important company culture is to the success of her company. “Culture has always been here, but Vistage has made me think about it more intentionally.” Deb recently led an effort to retool the company’s values to make sure all employees understand how their behaviors reflect the culture. For the first time—

inspired by Vistage—Deb added “accountability” to the company’s core values, which also include customer service, innovation and teamwork.

Accountability is also what Vistage brings to the table that helps make Deb a better leader. “Vistage has helped us grow more strategically,” she said, referring to the speakers, Brian and her group that have all influenced her company’s growth. “If I had been sitting by myself, like before Vistage, our growth would have been much slower,” she summarized.

Each month, members in Deb’s peer group take turns processing “issues.” Members can present a business challenge or dilemma and others weigh in with trusted advice on how best to ameliorate the issue. “It’s great to be able to listen to other people,” she said. “You always think your own problems are unique, but they’re not,” said Deb.

Discussions don’t always center on problems, too. Previous discussions around physically moving company operations helped her prepare for the recent move of her own headquarters. “In the past three months I have received so much help from Brian and other members in my group!” **V**