

VISTAGE

Member *Stories*

Wendy Benning Swanson
VERUM Staffing
St. Paul

At a glance

Role: *Small business owner*
Industry: *Executive recruiting*
Employees: *1–25*
Vistage chair: *Brian Davis*

Company background

VERUM Staffing, LLC is a woman-owned, Twin Cities-based staffing agency specializing in contract, contract to hire and direct placement of scientific professionals. The firm is a collaborative and personal boutique committed to meeting the needs of its clients, candidates and employees equally without exploiting one group to benefit the others. Currently the firm has seven employees with plans to add staff as the company expands into new markets.

The idea to launch her own professional staffing company came to Wendy Benning Swanson in the midst of her masters program in organizational leadership while at St. Catherine's University about a year ago. Wendy's path to entrepreneurship wasn't part of her original life plan, but when her husband tragically died in an accident five years ago the young mother of a one-year-old at the time, retooled her life to follow her passion for leadership and ethics.

Wendy parlayed a decade's worth of experience at



a large staffing firm, numerous contacts and industry knowledge of the narrow field of scientific recruiting to launch VERUM Staffing nearly three years ago. From the start, Wendy's thoughts were on how she could differentiate her firm from the plethora of larger, established companies dominating the market. Even the firm's name, VERUM, which is Latin for "truth" suggests this is not your old-school staffing firm. Wendy, proudly uses the tagline "Truth in Recruiting" to help position her company.

She's motivated to pursue this marketing approach because the staffing industry has high turnover, which can sometimes lead to questions of trust from some clients. "Client feedback from surveys has shown that many do not trust staffing companies," said Wendy. So far, VERUM's messaging is getting through to some larger companies. "We have developed new business with General Mills and Beckman Coulter," she noted, but the bulk of her business comes from mid-tier companies (100+ employees).

VERUM can be more successful working with smaller organizations because these firms' re-

cruiting capabilities are usually limited. VERUM cultivates a relationship with clients by digging deep to really understand their needs and requirements for specific technical employees. It's a high-touch, problem-solving business that rewards quality over quantity and speed. Wendy shared, "Some large companies call and need a candidate tomorrow." But that's not VERUM's niche, and it may never be.

In 2014 VERUM had its two-year anniversary; and, produced \$1.3 million in revenue in the most recent reporting year. Wendy has seven employees and plans to add more yet this year. "This July we are expanding into engineering and we'll add two recruiters to pursue new business." Wendy's long-term plan is to add information technology recruiting to the firm's offerings.

Vistage: "partnering" with a startup

Like most entrepreneurs leading a startup, Wendy felt she could accomplish everything on her own—from strategic planning to hiring to marketing and operations. It wasn't until she met [Brian Davis](#)—a local Vistage chair—about a year into her business did she realize that launching a company is a bit like approaching an iceberg in open seas. There are the obvious aspects of the business above the waterline, but it was the two-thirds of the business below the waterline where she discovered she could use some guidance and support.

Wendy joined one of Brian's Vistage Key groups—a group reserved for CEOs and senior leaders from smaller organizations or startups. She's in a group of 12 driven executives who have a passion to learn and grow their businesses. With Brian leading the monthly meetings and kinetic discussions, participants are both students and teachers as personal experiences are shared generously in

the group.

Shortly after joining Vistage, Wendy realized she was discovering answers to questions she didn't even know she had. And these were vital questions for any entrepreneur growing a business. "I had questions like 'when do I hire' and 'when do I invest,'" sharing a few examples.

Most monthly meetings feature guest speakers, who for Wendy have answered multiple questions and led to new business initiatives and practices within VERUM. She said "Brian is very conscious of the needs of all group members when choosing topics and speakers to plan for our meetings." Wendy noted that all of the speakers she's heard have been relevant for her business and have helped her achieve her strategic objectives.

"Every month I return to the office and share what I learned with my team," she said. She has had speakers help solve accounting issues, compensation systems, develop KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) and provide advice on how to manage different generations of employees. "At VERUM, we have employees representing baby boomers, generation X and generation Y," said Wendy. Each has their own unique style of communicating and her team members are all learning something from each other, she explained.

Establishing an enduring company culture

One important focus for Wendy is establishing an enduring company culture. Culture is something established companies often take for granted because it's passed down from employee to employee through multiple generations. But as the founder of VERUM, she is also the culture. For Wendy, getting the culture right is of utmost importance—something that defines her nascent

firm. Wendy's vision, guidance from Vistage speakers, and other company leaders in her group are helping her shape her culture.

She's learned to hire employees who are aligned with VERUM's cultural norms, which are based on truth, integrity and ethics. Collaboration is stressed and valued within the firm, an attribute that sometimes is a challenge in the recruiting world where success is measured on the individual efforts of recruiters. Moreover, collaboration is reflected in VERUM's office design with workspaces in proximity to each other for easy sharing of information and informal conversations. Conference rooms are all glass—sending the message to visiting job candidates: nothing happens behind closed doors here; i.e., no secrets.

VERUM's explicit culture has helped Wendy's potential recruiter candidates self select themselves out of contention if they feel the company's culture is not a good fit for them. But only one employee has been released for not living up to the firm's high standards.

Vistage has been instrumental to Wendy for helping her adopt a structure, or framework, in which to build the business on. That framework is Traction, a methodology adopted successfully by many Vistage firms about the size of VERUM. Traction also calls for companies to explicitly define a culture and mission and stand by it passionately. Traction stresses transparency among employees and Wendy says that the methodology has helped her break down the walls internally to more sharing between team members.

When discussing the value of Vistage, Wendy's discovered that Vistage has opened doors to opportunities she may not have had otherwise. Wendy cites a recent unforgettable [leadership development event in West Point](#), the military acad-

emy that she and a few dozen other Vistage members participated in. Her chair Brian worked with the Thayer Leader Development Group at West Point to bring his Vistage groups to the world-class training facility.

For Wendy, the opportunity was a fusion of intellectual stimulation, physical training and the chance to get to know her fellow Vistage members that would have been nearly impossible in any other venue. She came back with an evolved definition of what it means to be a great leader and new ideas she's eager to inculcate into VERUM's growing culture.

To be sure, new ideas and strong leadership will be essential to direct her long-term business plan: achieving annual revenue of \$20 million in 10 years. But for this startup leader that audacious goal is quite reachable. She's already traveled far in just two years. In addition to her own perseverance and drive, Wendy gives some credit to Vistage. "I can't put a dollar amount on it, but because of the things I've learned I would not be where I'm at today without Vistage." **V**