

VISTAGE

Member *Stories*

Steve Ludvigson, President
Cerasis
Eagan, Minn.

At a glance

Role: *President, Partner*
Industry: *Logistics*
Employees: *26–75*
Vistage chair: *Brian Davis*

Company background

Founded in 1998, [Cerasis](#) is a top North American third-party logistics company offering logistics solutions with a strong focus on LTL (less-than-truckload) freight management.

In addition to expertise and focus around LTL freight management, Cerasis offers truckload freight broker services, small package services, and end-to-end LTL eCommerce freight shipping solutions.

In 1998, three friends and coworkers walked out of Pitney Bowes to form a logistics company they named Cerasis. Steve Ludvigson—now president—and his partners were technical sales experts and eager to leverage their experience working with Pitney Bowes’ transportation software. But ironically, they chose not to focus on software and set their sights instead on helping customers broker freight while offering competitive rates.

Cerasis is what’s known in the industry as a third-party logistics company, or 3PL. Steve and his



partners soon found their customers were interested in having information about trucking companies, or carriers; that would help them make more informed decisions on which carriers to work with. In the late 90s, the Internet was a nascent idea and its potential not fully realized. Cerasis developed and launched a web-based rating system that gave its customers a tool to help them select the best trucking company to hire based on a handful of requirements—rates, availability, route, etc.

“We created tools that allowed customers to have the benefits of a transportation management system without the requirement to purchase, support, maintain and program,” shared Steve. Customers just log-in to see their options and pricing for any given shipment. Steve likens the company’s business model to Expedia for shipping. “We were

one of the first to have a web-based capability,” he shared.

Today, Cerasis manages the freight and logistics operations for shippers across North America. The company serves B-to-B customers in a range of industries, particularly manufacturing and distributors. Interstate Batteries, Finish Master, and Signature Automotive Products are three companies out of hundreds of corporate customers. Cerasis services those companies with 64 employees spread across four locations: headquarters in Eagan, Minn., and other locations in Houston, Dallas and Tulsa, Okla.

As an early adopter of web-based technology, Cerasis continues to differentiate itself around technology. “Our ability to integrate our technology into customer systems makes it easy to customize inexpensively,” explained Steve.

A Partner in the Form of Vistage

About five years ago, Steve received an invitation to attend a Vistage peer group meeting. The timing could not have been more prescient. “We were growing at the time, and we needed a fresh way to look at how to do things,” noted Steve. He said that his partners and he had never run a business and Vistage provided an opportunity to broaden his knowledge into areas where he had virtually no experience. Like corporate budgets, and dealing with HR issues for example.

His Vistage chair, Brian Davis, was at that session forming his first group, and Steve thought it was a good time to get involved. As it turned out, Steve is one of Brian’s eight founding CEO group members. “I liked that first session and the people I talked to,” said Steve, alluding to the meeting’s format and the processing of members’ business issues. “What I find in issue-processing is that

someone else is bringing an issue that I learn something from. These issues also affect me, or I realize my company has a similar problem,” Steve shared.

“One of the most satisfying things for me in Vistage is to understand that you think you might know everything, but you don’t, but neither does anybody else,” he observed. Steve said Vistage has helped him realize that he needs to make decisions in his business based on the information he has at his immediate disposal. The business opportunity may pass by if I wait for all the information I need to make a decision,” he shared.

Steve also said Vistage helped him realize that “If you’re not a good leader, you really can’t facilitate change.” He’s learned from speakers and his Vistage peers that he must make sure his leadership team must first embrace any organizational change to help lift the company to the next level. “You can’t execute without everyone being on the same page,” he said.

Early on Steve shared he was trying to transform Cerasis to be more effective and consistent in delivering customer service. “We’re pretty good at what we did, the customers love what we did, but I was concerned that we were getting a little lazy,” he shared. Several members of his Vistage group suggested Steve look at the book *Fish!: A Proven Way to Boost Morale and Improve Results* for insights into how to improve customer service.

Several principles from the book became cornerstones of the company’s evolving corporate culture. Cerasis employees are reminded daily of the company’s core values and the principles of *Fish!* through a screensaver and background that’s pushed to everyone’s computer.

He also cites Vistage for introducing the business

methodology EOS (Entrepreneurial Operating System) to him and other group members. Steve integrated the concepts and processes of EOS into his company. The results have been marked: more focus, structure and discipline in all elements of the business.

One-on-One Meetings Help in Tackling Complex Issues

Besides the chance to hear monthly nationally recognized speakers, Steve cites his one-on-one meetings with chair Brian Davis as the top reasons he joined Vistage and will continue to stay with it. Every month Steve shares with Brian what's working and what's not. "I'm expected once a month to write up my one-to-one worksheet. What's happening? What's working? What have I done," said Steve.

"Brian's a good chair! He'll challenge you to dig deeper on solving problems," Steve said. He said the sessions with other members are productive, and everyone's typically polite, but Steve explained the sessions with Brian have more candor. Brian doesn't let him off the hook. Especially when it comes to following up on the items Steve said he would accomplish in the last month. "Brian keeps me accountable," he summarized.

Steve draws ideas, and value from every pillar of the Vistage experience. "It's a matter of being able to take a piece from the speakers, a piece from the executive sessions, and a piece from your one-to-ones to pull together an answer that solves a problem," Steve said. "But in the end," Steve said, "It's not the way you solve a problem, it's about the way you can get it implemented." **V**