

VISTAGE

Member *Stories*

Brooke Lee, CEO
Anchor Paper
Minneapolis

At a glance

Role: CEO

Industry: Paper Products Distribution

Employees: 100–150

Vistage chair: Tom Gunderson

Brooke: *“Through issue processing, Vistage has shown me the value of standing back to look at that 30,000-foot view.”*

[Anchor Paper](#) CEO Brooke Lee was just named to Minnesota Business magazine’s prominent list “The (Real) Power 50 for 2017,” the first time a company executive has been recognized by the regional business press. For Brooke—the fourth-generation leader of the family-owned business—the recognition validates the growth strategy she’s creating for the leading distributor of premium printing papers and packaging products.

Anchor, like its name implies, has been a mainstay in the Twin Cities, serving customers since the 1920s. “We converted to ESOP ownership in the '80s, and today the company is 49 percent employee owned, and 51 percent family owned,” Brooke shares. Her 110 employees love working here—average tenure is 20 years.



The company’s core business is fine paper, but Anchor also generates significant business through its industrial and packaging division. Additionally, a niche business provides seed germination testing products to companies around the globe. In the 1930s, Anchor Paper collaborated with the University of Minnesota, Cargill, and Mosinee Paper Mill to engineer the first seed germination testing papers. Anchor’s specialized papers have filled a niche in the seed testing community ever since. “Our fine paper operation is 55 percent of sales and our industrial and packaging operation is approximately 45 percent,” shares Brooke.

Anchor also operates two retail stores called Anchor Paper Express. These stores serve local businesses, hobbyists, and designers. The stores carry hundreds of papers, envelopes, DIY crafting materials, and shipping supplies. In the two principal lines of business—fine paper and packaging—Anchor sales professionals call on commercial printers, designers, and manufacturers.

Brooke started working at her family's company in 2006, beginning with a role in purchasing on the packaging side of the business. But that wasn't before she spent time working for a different company in Japan after she graduated from college. She was appointed Anchor's CEO in 2014 after her mother, Linda, was tragically diagnosed with lung cancer and suddenly passed away.

When Brooke took the reins at Anchor, "I was keenly aware of what I didn't know," she says. That's when she began to think about joining a CEO peer group. She says she wanted to surround herself with people who are dealing with the same issues. "Even in different industries we all have the same challenges."

"Some of these questions and problems," she says, "just can't be shared with your executive team." Brooke vetted two peer groups and landed on Vistage after she met chair, Tom Gunderson. The two connected: "I felt like this was a man that could help me move the company forward and stay relevant."

Vistage as a Strategic Partner

Amid her transition to CEO, it took Brooke six to nine months to hire her replacements and become acclimated to her new role. During that transition, she says, "Vistage helped me get out of the weeds and focus on C-suite issues and challenges." She says Vistage helped her pinpoint what roles were necessary to grow the company. "As talent becomes harder to find, we're bringing in people, and we're creating positions that the company has never had before," Brooke says.

One of the critical roles she wants to fill swiftly is VP of operations. She says her chair, Tom, has connected her with a top executive search firm in the Twin Cities that will help her find the right candidate. That task would have been challenging without his "network," she observes.

A tenet of the Vistage experience—issue processing—has helped Brooke solve some intractable problems in the business. "Through issue processing, Vistage has shown me the value of standing back to look at that 30,000-foot view." For example, she shares, "In the past year I exited two executives, and I know that the process would not have been as smooth if I had not had 10 brains to pick who had gone through a similar process."

Now, she has introduced a similar process at Anchor. "I sit down with my executive team every week, and we process at least two issues. It's provided discipline and a framework to process issues and to build a team. That was critical in my first three years as CEO."

Brooke credits Vistage with helping her bring a laser-like focus on the right metrics. She's developed a set of key performance indicators (KPI) to track and for the first time created a dashboard to share with her executive team. "We're up almost three percent in margins, and I think that has a lot to do with our fixation on KPIs," she shares.

The Vistage experience has been so positive for Brooke and Anchor that she asked her company president and CFO, Eugene Marier, to join a Vistage Key group, which accommodates the needs of senior executives immediately below the CEO level. His involvement, says Brooke, has been a game changer. "Vistage strengthened

Eugene's leadership skills and provided him with an extensive network of other strategy-minded and growth-focused executives," adding, "It's also benefited me and our overall business strategy."

Brooke says that with Vistage's influence Anchor is much more strategic now. "We need to be more proactive than reactive," referring to the fast-changing landscape in her industry. "In a market and industry where there seem to be 10 big things happening a month, it's hard to extricate yourself out of that and stay true to your strategy." The company self-implemented the methodology, Traction, and that, too, has helped Anchor to be more disciplined and intentional. The real challenge for Anchor has been the unrelenting change in the paper industry. "I think there are new markets and new products that we could leverage and grow into," says Brooke.

She's glad her Vistage group members and chair Tom Gunderson will be along for the ride. Indeed, if this past year is a foreshadowing of the future, there are many more awards to come for Brooke and Anchor Paper. **V**