

VISTAGE

Member *Stories*

JJ Parker, CEO
Tightrope Media Systems
St. Paul

At a glance

Role: CEO

Industry: Software/Technology

Employees: 26–75

Vistage chair: Don Kielley

Company background

[Tightrope Media Systems](#) is a web-based digital signage and broadcast systems company. The company designs and markets the Carousel Digital Signage product and offers a range of creative services. Its line of broadcast products includes the Cablecast Digital Broadcast brand and Zeplay Instant Replays brand. Headquartered in St. Paul, Minn., the company employs 36 people.

The core product idea for Tightrope Media Systems came to cofounder and CEO JJ Parker in the formative stages of the Internet in 1996. At the time, JJ was 19 and a self-described “art school kid” attending the Minneapolis College of Art and Design.

His cofounder, Andrew Starks had been working for an audio visual integrator in the Twin Cities that sold a software package to teachers, which allowed them to display messages on hallway CRT TVs. Remember those days? JJ’s business partner was spending more and more time retraining the teachers to use the unwieldy system. They



both realized the clunky system was designed for graphic designers—not teachers. There must be a better way.

The partners set out to design a sign system that teachers could easily deploy and manage themselves. After trying unsuccessfully to sell their vision to others in the industry they turned to a funding source that didn’t need a mountain of paperwork and half their profits. A family member. As JJ recalled: “We got a \$5,000 loan from Andy’s mom and bought a laptop and a stack of programming books. I learned how to program and wrote the first version of the software, and Andy sold copies of it to public schools.” Their company headquarters at the time: Andy’s townhouse.

JJ’s design background was put to good work as he refined the interface for the company’s fledgling product. “That seems like a long time ago,” said JJ, “but it’s only been 15 years.” It’s hard to believe his company now employs 36 people and they’re still growing. JJ shared his company had \$8.6 million in revenue in 2014. That growth over a 15-year period primarily came from a niche

business Tightrope Media created when JJ and Andy started the firm: digital signage. JJ's company accidentally found itself at the epicenter of the digital signage business long before it became an industry, or even a word.

Delivering tough love

As Tightrope Media Systems continued to grow, JJ began looking for outside support to help him continue to build the business. He wanted someone, or a group, to bounce ideas off. And besides, he yielded, "I went to art school. I didn't have any formal business training." Two years ago he met with local Vistage chair Don Kielley through a friend who also owned a software company. After joining, JJ knew he was in the right spot because most of the people in his group all owned their companies.

"I really liked the style of the group," he said. "Everyone was direct with their feedback, opinions and ideas." JJ described the atmosphere as "tough love," void of politics. "People didn't mince words, but it was refreshing." The first experience with tough love came when JJ had a caprice to buy a toy company that produced windmills. His Vistage group threw cold water on his errant idea and pleaded with JJ to not get distracted by what was essentially a hobby at the time. "The group was really straightforward about saying 'You've got to fix the problems you have at Tightrope before you start spinning up other companies,'" he shared.

JJ didn't want to hear that, of course, because he was excited about the shiny new object in the room. He relented, however, and hunkered down to focus on Tightrope Media. It was good advice. After a year of focusing his energy on his company, he shared "We are executing really well." The company is profitable, and his employees love

coming to work. "We're simply working on being more awesome!" exclaimed JJ.

With a great year just behind them, JJ is earmarking some profits for R&D while the company works to keep its product lines fresh. Innovation is crucial to survival in his industry. Today, Tightrope is number one in its market and JJ wants to keep it that way. He's doubled his engineering staff this year to work on product improvements and next generation features.

The company is a close-knit group of 36 employees. And JJ sees himself as the person responsible for growing and cultivating the culture. Vistage has taught him that developing the company's culture is an intentional, purposeful process, not something left to happenstance. "I always thought that culture was something that emerged from your organization, but Vistage speaker Gerald Faust told us culture is something that is planned and purposeful."

Now, Tightrope Media even addresses culture in its strategic planning process. If there were one word you could use to define Tightrope Media's culture, it might be "un-corporate." JJ doesn't want a company that's like most of the rest. Indeed, Tightrope would fit in much better if it were headquartered in Silicon Valley. The company has no formal vacation policy, for instance. "We just ask everyone to balance their home and work life appropriately," adding, "Everyone is an adult and they can figure it out."

"We do have an exercise policy; however, which means that everyone has to work out for 30 minutes a day during the week, not including their lunch break," said JJ. Workouts at Tightrope could mean anything from walking around the block a few times, yoga in a conference room, going for a bike ride or throwing the Frisbee in the parking

lot. Many employees have treadmills under their stand-up desks where they can squeeze in 30-minutes of activity throughout the day. “My mantra is your brain needs oxygen to function better and the only way to get oxygen to your brain is through exercise,” JJ said.

Checking in

JJ shared that for someone like him, it’s important to have an individual or group that he can check in with every month. It’s assurance that tasks are getting done, and promises are being kept. “Don [his Vistage chair] does a good job of pressing me on what I said I would do. That kind of accountability is really important and helpful,” said JJ. Don makes sure JJ’s completing the tasks he has committed to.

He also commended his Vistage group for keeping him in check. “I think I have a tendency to execute a lot faster than sometimes I should,” admitted JJ. A year ago he decided to split the company up into two separate business units without consulting his Vistage peers first. Vistage has taught him to slow down and be more methodical about his decision-making, which in turn, has taken the emotion out of key decisions, especially when it comes to hiring or firing individuals.

If there’s one thing for certain, JJ’s glad he made the decision to join Vistage. The speakers he’s heard in the past year, such as Michael Allosso, along with the constant encouragement from his fellow members, keeps JJ coming back for more. **V**