

VISTAGE

Member Stories

Jean Beuning, Top Dog (CEO)
Top Dog Country Club
New Germany, Minn.

At a glance

Role: CEO, Owner

Industry: Pet Care Services

Employees: 1–25

Vistage chair: Brian Davis

As a former Marriott Corp. vice president, Jean Beuning spent most of her work day "barking" orders (or shall we say setting expectations) for employees at hotels across the country. But 15 years ago she traded all the benefits and perks of a big-time executive job for a position where she's the recipient of the barking. The only difference: the customers are doing all the barking, literally!

Jean is the Top Dog (CEO) of [Top Dog Country Club](#) in New Germany, Minn., a tiny suburb west of Minneapolis. Top Dog is a premier facility (think, country club) where the dogs get treated like vacationing guests. "It's like Club Med for dogs meets Marriott hospitality. I run it like a Marriott Hotel with that level of service and quality and attention to detail," she says.

Jean should know. She was a Field Assignment Manager . . . a troubleshooter for Marriott, charged with fixing broken hotels that weren't performing well from a revenue standpoint. "It was my job to go in, diagnose the problems and get them on a plan to profitability," Jean explains.



She was also a hotel general manager for eight years and helped the company, as a regional vice president, bring on ExecuStay by Marriott, a new division that focused on short-term corporate housing.

Eventually, Jean's passion for dogs and desire to start her own business surpassed the benefits of a secure career at a Fortune 500 corporation. She left Marriott to pursue her dream.

One of a kind

When she opened Top Dog Country Club, it was a new concept in dog care with groups of dogs playing free in outside yards. "People thought I was crazy because there was nothing like this. In fact, it was before most dog parks existed," says Jean. "Top Club was the first facility of its kind anywhere in the country."

Top Dog has 24,000 square feet of outdoor play in four separate yards—an enormous facility. Jean groups the dogs by size and temperament. The outdoor play areas are all AstroTurf laid over a drainage grid, and an asphalt base. The good news is no digging, mud, yellow grass or lawn

maintenance, but the AstroTurf has to be replaced every six or seven years at an expense of \$120,000.

"I was also the first facility to put in a swimming pool," she says. A swimming pool for dogs posed unique challenges. The pool's skimmers had to be upgraded, and it needed extra filtration. "It's a maintenance nightmare, frankly, but the dogs love it," she smiles. Jean and her staff of 20 teach some of her guests how to swim if they don't already know how. For breeds that can't quite master the dog paddle, life guards and life jackets are nearby.

While outside, Top Dog staff members are constantly engaging the dogs in social activities. "When we're out with the dogs, we're not just throwing a tennis ball. We engage them. We teach them good social skills," Jean explains.

"We've taken dogs that were not successful in other environments, not because they're bad dogs but because they didn't have strong pack leadership. We work with those dogs and re-socialize them," she says.

When the dogs aren't outside, they're housed in a "suite" eating, napping and just chilling. You won't find TVs at Top Dog—a gimmick at some so-called luxury kennels. Jean laughed at the trend saying, "dogs don't perceive television like humans. They see shadows, flickers of light, blurred images, and hear noises. They do not actually see Lassie at the well barking for Timmy. TVs are simply a distraction for dogs that don't get enough physical exercise."

Top Dog has 55 suites, seven of those are designated family suites for owners who "check in" multiple dogs.

Most of Top Dog's customers come from the

Twin Cities metropolitan area. A small percentage of these die-hard fans come from as far away as Chicago, Phoenix, Colorado and New York City to board their precious pups with her. Jean's country club for dogs has been featured worldwide, including Discovery Channel's Animal Planet, NBC's Today show, in the NY Times, and the World Harold in Paris. These customers jump through a lot of hoops just to get their dogs to Jean's facility.

Customers pay more for this high-quality care, of course, but owners love their dogs and often don't care about the money. Dogs stay at Top Dog for \$55 a day or \$65 a day over holidays and summer weekends. She also offers pick-up and delivery service for owners who don't want to make the drive out to Top Dog's rural location.

Innovative ideas from Vistage presenters

As of November 2015, Jean's been working with chair Brian Davis and Vistage for about a year. There were several elements of the Vistage experience that piqued her interest from the beginning.

"Vistage has given me a reason to step outside of my business and learn from other business owners and hear their perspectives," she says. Jean has realized in many cases that her issues are not unique to her business. "I like to hear other people's experiences, and how they've handled things, or how they've approached situations."

"Another benefit has been from the speakers," Jean observes. She's taken a lot of value from every presentation. "I can't think of a single one where I didn't take away a nugget or two that I've implemented in my business, and have seen some results."

Jean recalls presenter Scott Schwefel; who took the group through the Insights Discovery tool. The tool is designed to help leaders and co-workers gain deep insights around communication styles, and learn how to communicate effectively with those that have an opposite style. "I implemented this in a staff meeting, challenging my group to select a team member that they struggle to communicate effectively with and then use the tool to develop a plan on how to change the way they approach that individual, and tailor their message to that person's communication style. I've already seen an impact on how they work together", she says.

A speaker who introduced Traction—the Entrepreneurial Operating System (EOS)—to Brian's group also left a lasting impression on Jean. "I love the whole idea of getting the right people on the bus, and then making sure they're all in the right seats."

In fact, finding employees who fit Top Dog's culture and hard work environment is one of her biggest challenges. Top Dog is open every day 6 am to 9 pm. "My biggest challenge is finding people that have the work ethic," she says. And, of course, people have to love dogs . . . in fact they have to be passionate. The level of care is high with a ratio of one staff for every 5-8 dogs, a ratio you won't even find at child daycare centers. "We have a lot of special needs dogs that stay with us, including dogs from 8 weeks of age to 19 years", Beuning says.

An unshakable promise

Every employee knows Top Dog's unshakable promise to its clients, even before they start. "At Top Dog Country Club, it is ALL ABOUT THE DOGS. They are the #1 priority in every decision we make. Our core values? First, act with honesty

and integrity always," she shares. "The two most important characteristics anyone can have is honesty and integrity. I don't care how smart you are, I don't care how charismatic you are, I don't care how good you are at your job, if you aren't a person of honesty and integrity, to me, you're not worth a lot," she muses.

The second of Top Dog's three core values? Do the right thing . . . no matter what, and without compromise. Top Dog's third core value is just that . . . Add value . . . deliver more than is expected. She concedes Top Dog is more expensive than other facilities, but when you look at the level of care and services received, the value to the clients is unmatched. There's not a competitive facility that comes close, but she's not about to slow down or take her eye off her values and goals.

"The most valuable lesson I have learned in business came from Mr. Bill Marriott. He taught me to run my business with the idea that 'Success in never final', and to that end I never allow my team to 'get comfortable' and take the business for granted. I challenge them every single day to do better . . . to earn our reputation for excellence."

That's where Vistage has helped, too, challenging her to do better and improve her company operations. The accountability is great, she says. "When we make commitments, Brian holds us to them. He records every one and follows up every month."

Regarding Top Dog Country Club and my decision 15 years ago to leave my corporate life, "I am very blessed to have taken my passion and made it my life's work" **V**