

# VISTAGE

## Member *Stories*

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Kathy McCuskey, CEO  
Yamamoto  
Minneapolis

### *At a glance*

**Role:** CEO

**Industry:** Marketing and Branding

**Employees:** 26–75

**Vistage chair:** Brian Davis

### **Company background**

*[Yamamoto](#) is a 40-person agency serving local, national and global clients in a wide range of industries. The firm is a full-service creative agency with specialties in brand building, advertising and digital experiences among other disciplines. Yamamoto is part of a network of 50+ agencies owned by MDC Partners. MDC Partners is one of the fastest-growing and most influential marketing and communications networks in the world. Its agency partners leverage technology, data analytics, insights, and strategic consulting solutions to drive measurable results and optimize return on marketing investment for over 1,500 clients worldwide.*

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Based in Minneapolis, Yamamoto is a lean and agile creative shop doing great work for some of the world's most well-known brands. Its website features impressive case studies from the likes of Samsung, Progressive and Caterpillar.

CEO Kathy McCuskey has been leading the company for more than four years after honing



her skills at other Twin Cities' agencies such as Periscope and Mithun. Yamamoto is an agency that delivers "Inspired Ideas that Simply Sell," shared Kathy. "We talk a lot about the acceleration of commerce. We use marketplace insights to fuel differentiated creative work that drives results. Our digital and analytics team is building program infrastructure that allows us to track, optimize and ultimately be accountable for campaign performance."

We have had success working with companies that have complicated businesses with multi-step distribution. "We work with companies in retail, healthcare, financial services, technology and heavy equipment (think Caterpillar)," said Kathy. "It's a lot of fun to work with different companies."

Yamamoto applies business and creative learning from one category to the next. "The use of mobile devices as part of our shopping behavior can be applied to how we use devices to find a physician or clinic in the healthcare space. We have to deliver service the way customers need and want it, Kathy explained.

"We typically are hired at a brand engagement

level to help sort through something foundational to that business. The company might have a new product they're trying to introduce. They might be trying to expand a target audience or might be an older brand that needs to be refreshed," shared Kathy.

## Leading with strategy

There is usually a strategy component on every engagement, Kathy explained. That's when account teams go to work asking questions that ultimately shape Yamamoto's work: "Who are you? What do you do? Why are you better? Why are you different? How do you sell? What does that mean for marketing communications? What does it mean for a campaign when we get there?"

Sometimes, the company will conduct primary market research and use its proprietary tools like the Brand Workshop to help support information gathering, which will drive Audience Mapsinsights and a creative brief. Once the questions get answered, and the research has been completed, campaign work begins.

Yamamoto's campaign development process is unique. It co-opts a lean and agile methodology—originally developed by software coders in the tech industry—and uses it to create campaigns. "Our version of that is lots of people very quickly generating as many ideas as we can. We might fill an entire conference room with post-it notes and scraps of paper with ideas. We'll go from 200 ideas to 20 and test five."

She said the purpose is to find ideas that are going to be the best for the brand, the most meaningful to the audience. "The mix of media depends on who the audience is and what we need to get done. If it's a B2B audience, we might make different choices than if we were just in the

consumer space," explained Kathy.

The company has a balanced mix of B2B and B2C clients. "I think we were at 54 percent on the B2B side at the end of last year," Kathy noted. About half of the firm's business comes from organic growth. A third comes from referrals, and the remainder of Yamamoto's business comes from outbound prospecting.

## Welcome insights from fellow CEOs

Kathy has been a Vistage member for nearly a year now. [Brian Davis](#) invited her to the annual Minneapolis summit in 2014. She also attended a regular meeting and was immediately impressed with the caliber of the members and speakers. Kathy found time to fit the monthly meeting into her packed schedule and she's glad she did.

"The best way to describe my Vistage experience is it's a time for you to slow down and think about your business. I find myself scribbling notes and developing ideas for Yamamoto during those sessions." The perspectives and insights from other members have been invaluable.

Indeed, insights from Vistage have helped her improve operations at Yamamoto. She now has better tools and ways of thinking about resource selection, talent management and annual planning, for instance. When it was Kathy's turn to host her group's monthly meeting she used the meeting to get feedback on the company's business development approach, a helpful exercise that led to improvements.

Kathy also looks forward to her one-to-one coaching sessions with Brian. "It gives me a chance to free think with my Vistage chair about a particular issue and get targeted advice on how to handle those issues," Kathy explained.

“Brian is part businessman, part psychologist, part father, and part friend. We talk about business issues primarily. If I had personal or family stuff I wanted to talk about that was impacting business, he would be open to that, too. Brian challenges me when I need it and supports me when I need support. He’s a great mentor and helps me when I’m stuck to find my own solutions to my business and leadership challenges.”**V**