

# VISTAGE

## Member *Stories*

Marc Grossfield, Founder and CEO  
Tzfat Spirits of Israel  
Minneapolis and Tel Aviv

### *At a glance*

**Role:** Small business owner

**Industry:** Food and beverage

**Employees:** 1–25

**Vistage chair:** Alex Portnoy

### Company background

*Marc Grossfield's company, [Tzfat Spirits of Israel](#) is in the midst of launching its luxury vodka—AVIV 613. The special vodka is distilled from wheat, barley, olives, figs, dates, grapes and pomegranates grown in Israel on kosher farms. In Marc's words: "AVIV 316 vodka is ultra smooth with a slightly sweet finish. It took us nine years to get it just right. But we didn't develop AVIV 613 just to make a better vodka. We wanted to help bring more positive energy into our lives."*

In a brilliant marketing coup, Marc Grossfield worked to get his new luxury vodka—AVIV 613—included in the coveted Oscar swag baskets all nominees received following the 2014 Academy Awards ceremony. Not bad for a product that began as a hobby for the entrepreneur in 2004.

But if there ever was a labor of love, this is it. The Vistage Minnesota member has been refining his vodka for years—both the formula and packaging. Or as Marc stated it, "This has been on my to-do list for nine years." To be sure, this is not your



warehouse vodka refined from simple grains. Marc traveled to Israel to hire the legendary Gold family of distillers, whose roots reach back to 19th century Russia, prior to immigrating to Israel.

It took master distiller Yossi Gold three years to perfect the exquisite concoction of olives, figs, dates, grapes, and pomegranates. Water from the Sea of Galilee, the lowest freshwater source adds to the vodka's unique taste.

Everything about Marc's vodka has meaning beyond face value. The vodka's ingredients are all certified kosher, and even the bottle's glass is forged from sand particles found in the region. "I went through 279 sketches before we settled on the final design," he admitted. Marc shared he spent about \$50,000 on the bottle's design. Less



of a bottle, and more sculpture, Marc's website devotes several pages detailing its thoughtful design and the meaning behind each design determination.

Marc said the vodka space is crowded with well-funded super brands owned by suppliers like Diageo, Pernod Ricard and Bacardi, but he's undaunted. "Yes these companies have a huge advantage with distribution, but in terms of developing something that's truly unique, I have a big advantage over them because I didn't have to launch my product until it was ready," he explained.

From the looks of his marketing and brand positioning, AVIV 316 is on the road to becoming a compelling offering in this competitive market. His website and marketing materials successfully convey a brand story around the product that will appeal to a demographic that is captivated by products out of the mainstream. The AVIV 316's spiritual tagline: We Believe in the Power of Good Thoughts™.

### **"My Vistage buddies"**

Marc discovered Vistage through Chair Alex Portnoy, whom he met while studying the Torah with a larger group at a synagogue in Minnetonka. He's been a member for two years, while hard at

work launching AVIV 316. "The most valuable thing to me is to be able to get advice about whatever I'm facing in my business with 14 other CEOs that know me, and my business," he shared.

"CEOs think differently than vice presidents and directors of marketing, accountants and lawyers. We have a unique point of view, which is typically more urgent and encompasses all aspects of the business," Marc explained. He shared he wouldn't feel comfortable with any other group advising him.

Referring to his CEO group meetings, he likes to go around the room asking, "What would you do if you were me?" Marc knows the answers will be coming from people with both breadth and depth of experiences. "You walk out of that room, and you know what to do," he said bluntly. "We just hammer each other with questions," Marc added.

Marc noted there's enough talent in the room to diagnose nearly any business challenge. "We drill down to the specific problem, then share how we would solve it." He thinks this constant exchange is the essence of Vistage. "For me, this trumps everything else."

Marc refers to his CEO group as "My Vistage buddies," he said with evident sincerity. "They are a special group. We know a lot about each other's lives and businesses. That sharing of problems and problem solving forms a bond that's unique," described Marc.

It appears that he gets his biggest kick and "aha" moments from the group when he's helping other businesses. "I typically learn something new that I can apply to my business because, usually whatever problem someone else is facing, I've either faced it in the past or will probably face it in the future." Just committing the exchange to

memory or writing it down makes him a little smarter,” he explained.

### **Someone who asks the tough questions**

Every group needs a leader to keep it on track and for Marc’s group that’s Vistage Chair Alex Portnoy. Observes Marc, “It’s important to have someone to bounce ideas off of and play devil’s advocate with strategic planning and problem solving. Alex fulfills that role in our one-on-one monthly sessions. He has the experience working with CEOs like me to ask tough questions and hold me accountable. This adds value exponentially beyond the cost of Vistage.”

Guest speakers are also an important part of the Vistage experience. Marc admits he gets more out of some speakers than others, but in his words: “I do learn at least one thing every time we have a guest speaker.”

If there’s one thing for sure, Marc’s a lifelong learner with a long list of business experiences and achievements to show for it. Before launching his vodka company Marc ran his own promotional marketing company—growing it to a sizable agency (Johnson Grossfield) with clients like Target, Subway and Northwest Airlines. In 2004 he sold the company to a large publically traded marketing services firm. Sadly, Marc’s stock payout from the sale began to decline when the services firm imploded by making too many poor acquisitions, he said.

Marc responded to the setback with an investment in a baby safety products company called BreathableBaby. He purchased 50 percent and became their CEO. He grew the company tenfold before hiring a new CEO so he could work full time on his dream brand—AVIV 613 Vodka.

It takes time and patience to build a product and company from scratch. Three years for the vodka formula, a few years for the bottle and another two years for the packaging design. With Marc’s marketing background, entrepreneurial instincts and counsel from his “Vistage buddies,” he’s on the eve of launching something special. **V**