

# VISTAGE

## Member *Stories*

Rhoda Olsen, CEO  
Great Clips  
Minneapolis

### *At a glance*

**Role:** CEO

**Industry:** Retail—hair salon franchises

**Employees:** 30K+

**Vistage chair:** Jack Sell

### **Quick Facts**

#### *How has Vistage helped you become a better leader?*

I've been a Vistage Minnesota member since 1999. Vistage exposes me to a lot of ideas that focus on improving my leadership skills. At meetings, I receive direct feedback from my fellow CEOs. I learn from them what works and what does not. They've helped me work with leadership and related issues, giving me the confidence to suggest new ideas and lead sometimes controversial initiatives, like our online check-in program.

#### *How has Vistage helped you make better decisions?*

Vistage has helped me by being able to run information by other CEOs in my group. I've tried out ideas, and received feedback from others in my group that has helped sharpen my decision-making skills. The group gave me advice on how to win over franchisees and internal staff who



were uncertain about the value of sponsorships like NASCAR.

#### *How has Vistage helped you achieve better results?*

Vistage has definitely contributed to our [Great Clips] success. We wouldn't be where we are if it were not for the support and caring of my Vistage group. When you fall down and skin your knee there is always someone there to help you get back up. Vistage is very good at helping me solve business strategy problems.

### **3,400 hair salons and still growing**

Rhoda Olsen is the Chief Executive Officer of not so small Great Clips—the national chain of 3,400 hair salons throughout the United States and

Canada. Great Clips is a franchisor, which means Rhoda works with more than 1,000 leaders who are franchise owners across North America and leaders who work out of the company's Minneapolis headquarters.

The company employs more than 30,000 stylists at the growing organization, which is the world's largest salon brand with more than \$1 billion in revenue this year.

Rhoda concedes Great Clips is much bigger than the average Vistage-member company, but that hasn't stopped her from jumping in to take full advantage of the Vistage experience. She's been a member since 1999 and has no plans to give it up. Her Minneapolis Vistage Chair is Jack Sell, a former Great Clips franchisee.

For 14 years, Rhoda has been a familiar face at Vistage meetings, rarely missing an opportunity to siphon off gold dust from Vistage speakers or confer with her fellow CEOs about a management dilemma she may be having. She cites the time when her Vistage group members offered her helpful advice on how to work through the challenges to implementing new technology provided by ICS, the company's POS (point of sale) vendor. The advice paid off, but not after "Running up against a brick wall several times," she said. Her fellow CEOs helped her develop strategies to work through the issues and focus on a successful implementation.

Even CEOs have bosses, usually the chairperson of the board. But in Rhoda's case that coalition is a bit more complicated because the chairman is Rhoda's brother, Ray Barton. She just can't railroad her ideas through with little regard for his position on the subject. After all, she may be sitting across from him at Thanksgiving dinner.

## **Innovation as a mantra**

Rhoda likes to think outside-the-box—citing her industry's hyper-competitive market as just one reason to do so. With its steady stream of world-class speakers, Vistage is one source of inspiration that helps keep her up-to-date.

With innovation as one of her mantras, Rhoda wanted Great Clips to be the first in her industry to offer customers online check-in. Online check-in—developed and patented by ICS—gives customers the option to communicate with a specific Great Clip's store via computer or smartphone and wait from a nearby coffee shop if they choose. Many customers arrive just in time to be seated immediately.

Apparently, the company's millions of customers like this option. By the end of summer 2013, Rhoda believes more than 1 million customers will be using online check-in monthly. The smartphone app alone has been downloaded 1.5 million times.

In a press release Rhoda noted, "We have remained the industry leader because we leverage technology—not because it's a shiny new toy, but because it helps our customers and keeps them coming back for their next haircut." She thinks innovation like online check-in has helped Great Clips maintain its streak of 36 consecutive quarters of sales growth.

## **Vistage helps keep her on "track"**

Rhoda also supports NASCAR racing, a spectator sport dominated by males, but boasts a growing audience of female fans. NASCAR demographics are right in the crosshairs of the company's target market. Nevertheless, the NASCAR sponsorship was another hard sell—both internally with her

staff and externally with franchisees. Again, Rhoda turned to her Vistage group for advice. Her fellow CEOs suggested a more structured and rational approach, instead of the emotional appeal she had been using, to turn the tide on the decision.

Rhoda's Vistage CEO group has had her "back" on numerous occasions, recounting her personal struggle with cancer, which left her sidelined for a time while she underwent treatment. "The group helped me pull through cancer treatments," she said. During that terrible period, Rhoda recounts spending time with staff members at her bedside in one-to-one meetings so she could maintain management contact in her absence.

With her contagious enthusiasm for Vistage, Rhoda is also Minnesota's top Vistage ambassador. "I recommend Vistage more than any others in Minnesota," she boasts, adding, "I have seven recruits!" Maybe part of that drive to help bring more leaders into the Vistage family comes from her natural competitiveness. This CEO exercises everyday, frequently walking five miles just for the warm up. Rhoda insists her leadership team be both physically and mentally fit. And to drive that point home she loves challenging her staff—even the men—to frequent pushup contests. How many? Try 210-240 in sets of 30. And they are the real "guy" pushups! **V**