

VISTAGE

Member *Stories*

Suzy Hoaby, CEO
JL Buchanan
Minneapolis

At a glance

Role: CEO

Industry: Retail Consulting

Employees: 70

Vistage chair: Jacqueline Byrd

Suzy: “I found Vistage to be something where we could dig into things, had lots of time to talk about it, and get through the journey together for multiple issues.”

The next time you're strolling through the aisles of Target, and you discover what looks to be a new beauty product or fun new stationery program, there's a good chance another Twin Cities company had something to do with orchestrating a coveted spot for that product on the chain's shelf.

Meet JL Buchanan, a creative, retail consulting agency that provides a variety of services to both manufacturers and Target. “We help manufacturers do business with Target and help Target grow their business,” says Suzy Hoaby, the 70-person firm's CEO. Manufacturers hire JL Buchanan, or JLB to help get their products into Target, the Holy Grail of mass retailers. Suzy says JLB works with about 100 manufacturers.

“We sit in between a manufacturer and a retailer,” she says, trying to appeal to the needs of both par-



ties, with the goal of turning each engagement into a win-win. “We call on 50 different departments at Target,” Suzy shares. JLB works with a variety of product categories including, specialty food, healthy, natural snacks, stationery, toys and sporting goods, beauty products, housewares, home improvement, and home products.

JLB leverages a diverse portfolio of services to help its manufacturing customers create a compelling product offering that Target merchants will perceive as the next big seller destined to make consumers happy. The path to a Target store shelf typically begins with JLB performing consumer research using a variety of methods from in-store intercepts to online surveys and virtual focus groups.

JLB uses this data to show Target how a product may complement an existing line and demonstrate how the new item offers a better solution for the customer. Because Target likes to create an amazing shopping experience for their guests, “We’ll often do packaging or merchandising concepts that will make it beautiful and special for Target,” Suzy says.

JLB has worked with Target for 30 years, ever since its founder, Jeff Buchanan, initially launched the company as a sales rep business. Over time, Mr. Buchanan and Suzy morphed the business into what it is today. Suzy's been part of Jeff's team from the beginning, signing on as his seventh employee.

Suzy was appointed president in 2009 and CEO in 2016 when the founder decided to begin to prepare for the sale of his business. In her new role, Suzy focused on building the leadership team, creating a progressive workplace culture and driving profitable growth. "We've more than quadrupled the business in the last 8 years," she says. During that period, the company also grew from 24 to 70 employees.

After 30 years in business, they found a buyer that was willing to allow JLB to continue to run the company as they had for 30 years. They've kept all the elements that make JLB unique and retained all the talent to ensure continued excellence with Target and their clients. "We were looking for a partner that would allow us to continue to do what we do. We found one that so far, seven months in, has been very much that partner."

"Vistage is More Serious."

During the leadership transition, Suzy also inherited Mr. Buchanan's Vistage membership early in 2016. She had been part of another peer group for four years, but what she found in Vistage was an experience far more engaging. "Vistage is more serious," she says, comparing the two experiences. "I like that I'm in a group that has much bigger companies where in my previous group I felt like I was a big company."

"I found Vistage to be something where we could dig into things, had lots of time to talk about it,

and get through the journey together for multiple issues. I love that," says Suzy. One of the issues she dug into immediately after joining was JLB's transition to a new owner. "Many members had been a part of a sale or a merger, and so they brought a great perspective of things I could potentially expect."

Suzy said the insight from her Vistage colleagues and chair Jacqueline Byrd was helpful because she was in unfamiliar territory leading 70 people going from a privately held firm to being a part of Advantage Solutions, a \$2 billion global marketing company. "You can imagine the angst that a lot of people had," she says. She said numerous Vistage members reached out to help her and her employees throughout the journey. "They were amazing, not only in the meetings but outside the meetings with lots of people reaching out."

Vistage is also teaching her to let her employees find their way and lay off any micro-managing. "I find that I'm potentially hindering my new executive team." She says, "My Vistage group reminds me to set clear expectations, put a timeline to it and measure."

Her chair Jacqueline is also helping Suzy ease into her new role as CEO. "Jacqueline's been extremely helpful in making sure I stay true to myself. She's an excellent listener." Suzy says she also appreciates the industry diversity within her Vistage group. The common denominator within a dozen different industries, she says, is around people. "How to find good people, how to motivate people and how to keep your culture alive." And, she concludes, "The Vistage meeting is a time for us to think a little bit more creatively, which I think everybody enjoys." **V**