

# PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

## Christine Astorino: The Wow Factor

By Jim Roddey  
Contributor

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*She is young, beautiful, smart and successful. Other than that, Christine Astorino doesn't have much going for her.*

*As founder and CEO of fathom, Christine's clients include the Pittsburgh Penguins, Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh, PNC Firstside Park and the NHL. And that's just the beginning. As fathom has continued to grow, the types of experiences it works to shape and improve have expanded from architecture and design to include clients in financial services, consumer packaged goods, entertainment, restaurants and the nonprofit sector and beyond.*

*The phrase "Wow Factor" may have been created just to describe this talented woman.*

**Jim Roddey:** What kind of firm is fathom?

**Christine Astorino:** Right now you could call us a design research firm, but that doesn't do fathom justice. "Research" makes the work we do sound too inward-focused and limited. Really, fathom research is centered on the people, and understanding them on a deeper level. We blend various methods from design and social sciences to create highly visual and tactile research tools which uncover unspoken needs and desires. Those are synthesized into concrete recommendations our clients use to enhance or create environments, brands, products and services that meet the emotional needs and desires of the people who use them.

**JR:** What is unique about fathom?

**CA:** Well, we're a start-up, but not the typical kind of start-up. We're born out of Astorino, an established architecture firm, so the foundation of our work is based on 37 years of applying design thinking to enhancing people's everyday lives.

We are a women-dominated firm, six women deep at the moment, and growing. I believe in having a nimble and fluid core team that thrives on the constant flow of new ideas that we generate daily. We act quickly to respond to client needs and continually stay ahead of market demands. We are a curious team by nature, so we are always challenging ourselves to find better ways to reveal insights and communicate our ideas.

**JR:** How has Pittsburgh been a great place to start fathom?

**CA:** It's such an accessible location in so many ways. The geographic location makes it easy to do field research and access our clients. So many great corporations and organizations have headquartered themselves here, but we're also working with clients throughout the country as well. Pittsburgh is also rich with resources. We've developed strong partnerships with local institutions like Carnegie Mellon University, where we have recruited full-time staff as well as subject matter experts we involve in our design process. And since Pittsburgh is such a tight-knit community where everybody knows somebody, it's easy to network and locate resources and talent to utilize in our project work. I also like the idea that here in Pittsburgh, no one is really quite like us, and in some ways, it's easier to be different and forge a way of your own. This city has always been a great place for entrepreneurial spirits, and it continues to be. Pittsburgh has a way of making things possible for people. It's a very encouraging place to start business, or two...

**JR:** Do you have a favorite project?

**CA:** That's a tough question. I don't really have a favorite project, because each of our projects is so rewarding and special in its own way. But I do have favorite moments in each project. The people I've met in each project never cease to amaze and inspire me. I remember a Discovery Session we did with disabled veterans to design a healing environment for those with physical and mental health issues. The comments and ideas that these veterans provided were truly inspiring and insightful. And then there was the ethnographic research we did at Penguins' games -- watching the fans to find out what makes them tick. It was so energizing to see the excitement and dedication that Pittsburgh fans have for the Penguins -- and that was before they won the Stanley Cup! Of course, working with the kids at both Children's Hospital and the Children's Institute was life changing. I was able to see firsthand the courage and maturity these young kids had developed to deal with their personal struggles with illnesses and disabilities.

**JR:** What would people be surprised to know about you?

**CA:** Well, I've been a snowboarder for 20 years. So if you can't find me at my office or working with my clients for New Dawn Garden Design, a company I started over three years ago, you may be able to find me cruising down the mountain with my two children, Jack and Sophia.

I also serve on two boards, which I am very excited about. One is a national one, The Cultural Landscape Foundation, which is the only not-for-profit foundation dedicated to increasing the public's awareness of the importance and irreplaceable legacy of cultural landscapes. This keeps me strongly tied to my background in landscape architecture, and I find it to be a great way to give back to a profession that has given me so much.

I also recently joined the board of directors of the Mattress Factory. This is a place that I find to be so unique and incredible in so many ways, and a place I have always admired for its vision and culture. I am now very honored to call myself a board member.

*This Pittsburgh native and Penn State alum has worked throughout the United States, Europe and New Zealand. Fortunately for our region, she has chosen Pittsburgh as home base for herself, her children and her company.*

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