

Our ‘Top Women in Grocery’ Share Career Advice

In this year’s Progressive Grocer [Top Women in Grocery Awards](#), Meijer had five winners in the store manager category, seven “rising stars” and three senior-level executives. We asked these leaders to pass along their best piece of career advice.

Senior-Level Executives:



Lynette Ackley – Vice President, Fresh

Lynette was honored for how her team responded swiftly to customer behavior changes during COVID-19. They changed 100-plus stores from full-service seafood to self-service, to help our customers easily access the products they wanted. With the goal of reducing food waste, Lynette and her team donated more than \$1 million in frozen turkeys in partnership with the [Flashfood](#) app, bringing short-dated perishable products to those in need.

Career advice: “Trust the advice of mentors and, when a role or opportunity is offered that is a left curve to your perceived path, take a risk, try something new, and be a more courageous and knowledgeable leader as a result.”



Calli Schmid – Vice President, Merchandising-Grocery

Calli leads the cross-functional team driving Own Brand growth. She has served on the advisory board of Great Sports, Great Kids, which supports athletics in schools.

Career advice: “Look at your career like a marathon, not a sprint ... and enjoy the experience every step of the way!”



Kristen Williams – Vice President, Customer and Digital Technology

Kristen is responsible for all customer-facing technology, such as our website, app and mPerks loyalty program, as well as all digital, data and analytics. As a volunteer, she works with the Girl Scouts of America, focusing on technology, and also gives her time to FIRST Robotics, serving as a lead coach of a Lego Robotics team.

Career advice: “Be yourself – no one else can do it – and know that you are enough exactly as you are.”

Rising Stars:

Emily Brzezinski – Manager, Marketing Operations



Emily transformed many marketing productions during COVID-19, such as converting all of our weekly ads to a virtual format and reworking/updating all required project plans across marketing. She identified nonessential work and repurposed hours to other needs, such as integrated leave management or the Customer Contact Center. Emily is also a member of two Meijer team member resource groups.

Career advice: “Work hard and be kind. Also, as you progress in your career, being nervous for your next assignment or role is a great indication of whether you are pushing yourself enough.”



Christina Fecher — Senior Manager, Corporate Communications

As company spokeswoman, Christina handles all communication regarding the [Meijer LPGA Classic](#), a golf tournament that benefits [Simply Give](#), our hunger relief program. Over the past 8 years, the tournament has generated more than \$7.4 million for our [Simply Give](#) food pantry partners across the Midwest and Christina has played a key role all along. Christina is a regular volunteer for Stand Up for the Cure and the Meijer YoPro team member resource group.

Career advice: “I know what I want and I put in the hard work to get there, and it nearly always pays off in the end. That “end” hasn’t always come when I thought it should, but it comes at the right time. I think back to when I was ready to either take that next step or move on, and I thank my lucky stars that I took a deep breath, calmed my worries and focused on what I could control: the quality of my work and a positive, team-player attitude. If I would’ve chased my fears — instead of focusing on my dreams — I wouldn’t be where I am today.”



Cherie Hacker — Director, Own Brand and Quality Assurance for Food

Cherie oversees Own Brand Food products. Her primary role is making sure our Meijer brand products meet or exceed the quality of national brands on our shelves. This year, she underwent cancer treatment and is now in remission. Cherie makes time to volunteer for Kids Food Basket, which is committed to ending childhood hunger, and is a member of the Network of Executive Women.

Career advice: “Focus on your strengths, not your weaknesses. Your strengths are what make you who you are, and you can always use the resources around you to bolster your weaknesses.”

Carla Hendon — Director, Supplier Diversity and Indirect Procurement

Carla led the establishment of our [supplier diversity](#) initiative in 2020, planning and conducting the company’s first Supplier Diversity Summit. She also co-chaired our Mosaic team member resource group supporting People of Color, established a board of directors and partnered with the health and beauty merchandise team to improve our textured-hair offerings. Carla is a volunteer at Northpointe Christian School and Kids Food Basket.

Career advice: “Always be curious and willing to be uncomfortably stretched in your role. Both keep you discovering strengths and weaknesses that help you grow and contribute with innovation and unique perspective.”



Jen Pawlowski – Merchandise Inventory Manager, Meat, Packaged Meat and Seafood

Jen led her team through the many challenges of 2020 and their effect on the meat and seafood department, creating double-digit growth and a record-breaking holiday season. She used her background in finance and supply chain logistics to reinvent our product flow process, adding automation for store-ordered and random-weight categories. Jen is a member of the Network of Executive Women and volunteers with her daughter's Girl Scouts troop.

Career advice: "Choose a job that brings out the passion inside you every day. Try something new and make mistakes. It is not always about what you achieve but what you have overcome that defines you. You want to look back on your career and be proud of what you've accomplished."



Kim Prall – Manager, Regional Asset Protection

Kim is responsible for managing more than 500 individuals, both direct and indirect reports, across our Southern Region, which she led to achieving the lowest shrink rate in region history. She received the Excellence in Execution Award from Franklin Covey Co. in 2020 for the company's work reducing shrink. Kim is a volunteer and sponsor at the Oxford Women's Care Center in Ohio and is also an active leadership participant in ongoing Inforum diversity, equity and inclusion peer coaching program.

Career advice: "Stay focused, yet flexible. Be willing to listen more than you speak and continue to keep an open mind to learn from every experience. Most importantly, always be authentic in everything that you do to earn the respect and trust of those that work alongside you."



Liz Rzepka – Inventory Manager, Consumables/Auto

Promoted from dry grocery buyer to consumables and automotive inventory manager last July, Liz transitioned to helping align short- and long-term business decisions and strategies. In her new role, she adjusted to leading a new team during the pandemic and managed some of the highest-demand categories, including bath tissue, paper towels, surface cleaners and cleaning wipes, finding ways to inspire her team to overcome obstacles during that difficult time. Liz volunteers at the Helen DeVos Children's Hospital.

Career advice: "Don't be afraid to take on challenges that seem greater than what you think you are capable of."



Store Managers:

Denise Bower — Store Director, Portage, Michigan



Denise and her team achieved the highest sales ever for their store in 2020, and her store beat both its shrink and fresh shrink goals. Our survey for team member engagement at her store resulted in the 12th-highest score in the company and the highest in the Kalamazoo market. During COVID-19, her store helped area food banks and joined with local schools, providing backpacks to take home food during virtual learning.

Career advice: “Stay true to who you are, believe in yourself and go after your dreams. Don’t let anyone else decide what you are capable of doing.”

Amy Griffis — Store Director, Lafayette, Indiana



In a tough year, Amy and her team exceeded their sales goal and also surpassed a multitude of other financial goals for their store. Amy mentors many team members and has won several awards, including earning her Food Retail Certificate. Amy volunteers for Habitat for Humanity, Junior Achievement and other organizations, and also serves as the chair of the Meijer Central region for the Women at Meijer team member resource group.

Career advice: “Realize that you cannot drive success alone. Value and appreciate those within your span of care. A team that feels valued and included will create an atmosphere that will drive success.”

Andrea Pickens — Store Director, Findlay, Ohio



Andrea just completed her first full year as a store director. Her store team participates in community outreach together and, during COVID-19, provided much-needed support to the store’s community through financial assistance and acts of service, especially for City Mission, a local homeless shelter. Andrea was selected by senior leadership to participate in the Food Marketing Institute Future Leaders Food Retail Certificate Program and was named the Meijer Toledo Market White Glove Champion for maintaining such a clean store.

Career advice: “A leader must set the example and take the time to invest in others to help them achieve their goals and successes. During my career, I have had wonderful mentors that taught me many important lessons. I am committed to pay this forward with my team. A quote that I think is fitting is, ‘For our own success to be real, you must contribute to the success of others.’”

Kelli Quintana — Store Director, Coldwater, Michigan

Kelli, who serves as a market mentor for new store directors, achieved exceptional financial results in the past year. Her work with several team members resulted in four being promoted into their first leadership positions. Kelli completed a leadership certification course through the Food Marketing Institute and currently attends Grand Rapids Community College, pursuing a retail management certificate.



Career advice: “Take care of your team and they will take care of you.”



Cassandra Robinson – Store Director, Lorain, Ohio

Cassandra led her team leaders in teaching, training and coaching a staff of 350 for a new store opening while COVID-19 protocols were in place. She worked with the construction team to safely open the store without outside store support teams or vendors to build fixtures, set planograms, or stock shelves and displays. The new store has exceeded sales expectations since opening in July 2020. Cassandra also serves on the board of the local Boys & Girls Club.

Career advice: “Never be afraid to ask questions or admit that you may need help. As a woman in a male-dominated industry,

you may feel it is a sign of weakness to ask questions or request help, but it takes confidence and strength to recognize areas that you need to improve upon. Also, our team needs to see this trait within us so they are not afraid to seek answers.”

We are so proud to have such distinguished individuals on our team. Congratulations, Lynette, Calli, Kristen, Emily, Christina, Cherie, Carla, Jen, Kim, Liz, Denise, Amy, Andrea, Kelli and Cassandra!

<https://meijercommunity.com/Our-Top-Women-in-Grocery-Share-Career-Advice>