

Cover Story

ROOTS AND WINGS

The industry's female movers and shakers are part of a nurturing network supporting talented women.

Introduction by Bridget Goldschmidt / Honoree summaries by the PG staff

Although the Top Women in Grocery — affectionately, and this year appropriately, known as TWIGs — whom *Progressive Grocer* selects every year can attribute the honor to their own hard work and willingness to go the extra mile, most, if not all, of them would readily admit that they didn't get there by themselves. Most had a mentor at the start of their careers, often a manager of either gender who took an interest in their professional development and encouraged them to make the most of the opportunities that came their way. In return, many TWIGs have decided to pay their gratitude forward by acting as mentors to up-and-coming female associates.

More than ever, however, mentoring of women has become more formalized, through such entities as associate resource groups, Lean In circles and organizations like the Network of Executive Women, all of which offer structures enabling participants to discuss the problems women face in the workplace and how they can overcome those issues and further their careers. That way, fewer female associates will fall through the cracks or migrate to other industries offering easier paths to the c-suite.

That being the case, it's only natural that the nominators of many of this year's Top Women in Grocery cited their mentoring experiences among their outstanding achievements.

Take Suzette Stevenson, manager of compliance at Landover, Md.-based Giant Food LLC, for example, who "stepped in as a co-lead of the [company's internal] mentoring circles and has proven to be a tremendous resource to all of the existing mentoring teams," according to her nomination form. "In a short period of time, she was able to revamp the mentoring circle teams and increase the number of participants, ensuring there are active circles across the entire Giant Landover market area. Suzette participated in various circles as an observer and gathered key information to help establish best practices and common threads that were shared among all the mentoring teams. Suzette's focus on the overall health of [the] mentoring circles elevated the effectiveness of the program in 2016 and laid the foundation for an even greater 2017."

Of course, the tried-and-true, one-on-one style of mentoring is still alive and well among our Top Women. Michelle Hall, director, corporate human resources at Grand Rapids, Mich.-based Meijer, "invests herself each and every day in actively mentoring and coaching talent across HR and within the corporate functions she serves," her nomination form notes. "Michelle's impact comes in her ability to deliver direct and candid feedback in a way that inspires personal and professional growth and development."

Our Top Women aren't content to foster diversity just by mentoring workplace colleagues, however. Katie Pacanowski, manager, RSC HR business at Pittsburgh-based Giant Eagle, is involved with the nonprofit Pennsylvania Women Work's 3 Cups of Coffee program, which empowers women in career transition through job readiness, emotional growth, education, training and employment, while Alia Al-Hagri, leader, indirect sourcing and supply optimization at Cincinnati-based Kroger, as an advisory board member of the University of Cincinnati's ADVANCE program, helps female and male students of color develop professional skills as they prepare to enter the workforce.

This year, *Progressive Grocer* received more than 600 submissions, from which we had the near-impossible task of selecting our slate of 2017 Top Women.

To the 348 selected — truly the standouts in their field — we offer our warmest congratulations, along with kudos to all of the unsung mentors who helped them grow into the exemplary role models they are, and cheers that so many TWIGs have chosen to share their wealth of experience not only with peers at their companies and beyond, but also, perhaps most crucially, with the next generation.



PROGRESSIVEGROCER'S **TOP WOMEN IN GROCERY**

SENIOR-LEVEL EXECUTIVES



AIMEE BECKER
VP, Strategic Services, Daymon

- Becker worked to restructure the brand and category strategy teams, whose work was often seen as duplicative. Reviewing strategy, structure and people making necessary changes helped Daymon to be seen as a more strategic branding firm that's better aligned with its retailers. Project completion rates are now up to 25 percent faster.
- Following her promotion from VP, brand and category strategy to VP, strategic services, she's leading the transformation of Daymon's design agency.
- Becker served as a mentor in the Babson College Coaching for Leadership and Teamwork Program from 2010 to 2017.



JENNIFER KIMURA
VP, Finance, SAS Retail Services, Daymon

- Since joining Daymon seven years ago, Kimura, who is responsible for all finance-related matters at SAS, has helped achieve 700 percent growth, increasing both the top and bottom lines.
- She and her team implemented a new financial system and operational system in parallel to support the growth of the operation while maintaining the margins of the organization by minimizing additional headcount to support the transitions.
- Kimura helped lead the most efficient group of professionals to run the finance team, minimizing costs but maximizing efficiency and growth opportunities.



GINA PFISTER
Regional VP, SAS Retail Services, Daymon

- Overseeing a multimillion-dollar budget, Pfister delivered 50 percent growth over last year's numbers.
- She served as SAS's account lead for a major new customer program launch, built out teams of 1,300-plus associates and achieved 99.6 percent execution results. She led the startup process of this new program, built a customized execution format for the customer, integrated IT systems and led process change by partnering with the customer.
- Always willing to take on new challenges, Pfister is one of Daymon's leading culture trainers, supporting its national efforts to align its company culture brand.



REKHA RAMESH
SVP, IT & Digital, Daymon

- Ramesh introduced "fast prototyping," a concept with cloud solutions, which provided rapid turnaround time for technology solutions for the business, and reduced heavy upfront investment while aiding adoption by the user community.
- She implemented a digital catalog for Daymon's import/export business, migrating what previously was done on paper to a digital platform.
- Ramesh gave the central sourcing team the ability to gain visibility into day-to-day operations via Google search technology within the Daymon network, to consolidate vendor data from various sources.



DEBORAH L. ENGLISH
President and Founder, DL English Design

- Among her many projects, English and her team of architects, interior designers, fabricators and installers rolled out the first 365 by Whole Foods Market, in Los Angeles, with two additional locations debuting in Portland, Ore., and Bellevue, Wash.
- She served as a panelist for sessions during the 2017 Hospitality Design Expo and the Urban Land Institute, and as a guest on KCRW-FM's "DnA: Design and Architecture" radio show.
- In the past year, she's been nominated for an award from the Retail Design Institute for her supermarket design work, among other honors.



KELLY VLAHAKIS-HANKS
President and CEO, Earth Friendly Products

- Vlahakis-Hanks led Earth Friendly Products' facilities to achieve carbon neutrality, water neutrality and Platinum-level Zero Waste Platinum certification.
- Under her direction, the company instituted one of the country's strongest employee benefits programs, offering a variety of paid health care, personal leave and disability benefits, as well as financial incentives for sustainable living, and raised minimum pay to \$17 per hour.
- Earth Friendly Products received such honors as the California Governor's Environmental & Economic Leadership Award, and U.S. EPA WasteWise Small Business Partner of the Year.



LINDA NORDGREN
President and CEO, Encore Associates

- Assembling a team of retail and CPG industry experts, Nordgren, whose own retail career included successful stints at Safeway and Target, acquired Encore Associates.
- As one of the four founding strategies to drive top-line growth, she focused the team on identifying strong, inspiring female executive leaders and supported their advancement to CEO and board positions in the CPG industry.
- Nordgren assembled a cross-functional team that identified the source of a failing CPG retailer sales account and created a sales growth strategy, resulting in positive identical sales at a national retail chain.



SONJA BOELHOUWER
Regional VP Store Operations, Giant/Martin's

- Boelhouwer's Yes I Can customer service program began as a six-store pilot in which customer feedback was gathered through survey monitors and the results were shared with associates to provide positive reinforcement and identify opportunities for improvement.
- She introduced region period reviews conducted by each district director and human resource manager to examine the business and encourage innovative solutions.
- Boelhouwer increased both gender and minority representation in the store manager position, and worked to form a mentoring circle with new female district directors.