

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE WISCONSIN GROCERS ASSOCIATION

Wisconsin Grocer

Spring 2026



Read about WGA
Chair *Steve
Burkhardt's*
career journey
on page 10

Career Spotlights

+

A Focus on *Local*

+

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Table of Contents

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Topics

- President's Message Pg 5
- Advocacy Report Pg 7
- WGA Chair: Steve Burkhardt..... Pg 10
- 2026 Events Calendar..... Pg 14
- WGA Business Partners Pg 17
- Events Spotlight Pg 19
- Career Q&A Pg 22
- Around the State Pg 25
- A Focus on Local Pg 28
- New Members / New Products..... Pg 29
- Sendik's Celebrates 100 Years Pg 30

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President's *Message*

Celebrating the Grocery Workforce

Every time a customer walks into a grocery store, they encounter something extraordinary. Shelves are stocked, produce is fresh, prices are clearly marked, orders are filled, and questions are answered with care. None of this happens by accident. It happens because of the people who make up Wisconsin's grocery workforce.

This issue of *Wisconsin Grocer* is a celebration of people. From the front end to the back room, from independent single-store operators to multi-store teams across the state, grocery employees are the steady force that keeps our communities fed and connected.

The grocery industry is often described as "essential", which is a word that has begun to feel abstract. But it means that our workforce shows up every day, during every season, under every set of circumstances. You work early mornings and late nights. You manage supply chain disruptions, changing consumer expectations, and evolving technology. Some of you have literally saved lives. The human connection that you bring to grocery retail goes far beyond essential.

Grocery stores are community anchors in Wisconsin. The workforce behind your stores is what keeps those anchors steady, and it reflects the communities you serve. Students starting their first job. Parents balancing work and family. Career professionals who have spent decades building expertise in this industry. Together, you have created one of the most diverse and dependable workforces in our state. WGA connects with dozens of people daily, including cabinet secretaries, legislators and staff, and leaders across

industries who proudly say that their first job was in their hometown grocery store.

One thing I hear most often from our members is how proud they are of their teams. Store managers talk about associates who step up without being asked. Owners share stories of employees who have grown from part-time baggers into department leaders or store directors. These are not rare stories. They are common, and they are powerful.

The grocery industry also offers something increasingly important in today's economy: opportunity. Grocery careers provide pathways for advancement, skill development, and leadership. Whether someone is interested in operations, merchandising, logistics, technology, or management, our industry offers real chances to grow. That opportunity is made possible by employers who invest in training and by employees who are willing to learn and lead.

At the Wisconsin Grocers Association, we see it as our responsibility to support this workforce in meaningful ways. That includes workforce development initiatives, safety and compliance resources, leadership programs, and events that recognize excellence. When we invest in people, we strengthen stores. When we strengthen stores, we strengthen communities.

Celebrating the grocery workforce goes beyond a single issue of a magazine. It is about recognizing the daily commitment that keeps food on tables across Wisconsin. It is about gratitude, respect, and understanding the value of work that is often taken for granted.

To every cashier, clerk, stocker, driver, buyer, manager, and executive reading this—thank you. Thank you for your professionalism, your resilience, and your pride in what you do. You are the reason our industry remains strong and trusted.

As we look ahead, challenges will continue to come our way. But if there is one thing I am confident in, it is the strength of Wisconsin's grocery workforce. With dedicated people at the heart of our stores, our industry will continue to serve, adapt, and lead.



A stylized, handwritten signature of Mike Semmann in black ink.

Mike Semmann
President/CEO
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Advocacy *Report*

WI Legislative Session Ends, Fall Elections Begin, Advocacy Continues

By Mike Semmann

Big Questions and Big Stakes for Wisconsin Grocers Heading into the Fall Election

As Wisconsin's legislative session winds down, grocery retailers find themselves at a familiar crossroads. While lawmakers prepare to return home and voters turn their attention toward spring and fall elections, the policy questions facing the food retail industry remain unresolved and, in many cases, increasingly complex.

That reality was front and center at the Wisconsin Grocers Association's recent policy session and Capitol Day, which brought together 120 participants from four trade associations. The day underscored both the strength of collective advocacy and the uncertainty that lies ahead as elections approach and legislative calendars tighten.



Bills Introduced in the 2025-26 Wisconsin Legislative Session

At the time of printing, lawmakers introduced more than 2,400 bills across both chambers of the Wisconsin Legislature.

Assembly Bills

- 1,238 Assembly Bills

Senate Bills

- 1,185 Senate Bills

Total Bills Introduced

- 2,423 total bills

A Crowded Agenda and Unfinished Business

The final days of a legislative session often move quickly, and this year was no exception. Lawmakers faced packed agendas, marathon floor sessions, and a long list of bills competing for attention. For grocers, the challenge was not just tracking activity but understanding what did not advance and why. Here are a few of the items that are expected to be worked on next legislative session (impacting grocers positively and negatively):

- Hemp Products
- Alcohol Modernization
- Retail Theft
- Pricing
- Local Environmental Regulation (plastic bag ban)
- Gift Cards

For WGA members, the takeaway was clear. Advocacy does not end when the gavel falls. In many cases, it simply shifts from the Capitol floor to regulatory agencies, courtrooms, and campaign trail conversations.

Updated Retail Guidance on Pennies

Topic	U.S. Treasury / Federal	Wisconsin DATCP
Status of the Penny	Treasury ended production of new pennies (late 2025) and the Federal Reserve will continue recirculating ~114 billion existing pennies "as long as possible."	The state acknowledges penny shortages as part of national phase-out and provides rounding guidance specific to Wisconsin.
Is rounding federally required?	No federal rounding mandate yet. Treasury states that merchants will need to round as pennies fall out of circulation, but no law currently imposes a required rounding method.	DATCP allows businesses to choose any methodology but strongly recommends rounding down to reduce consumer harm.
Recommended / common rounding method	Treasury FAQ and federal analyses cite symmetrical rounding as the recommended method: 1, 2, 6, 7, round down; 3, 4, 8, 9, round up.	DATCP recommends always rounding down: 1, 2, 3, 4, round to 0; 6, 7, 8, 9, round to 5.
Example of rounding under the guidance	\$1.91 becomes \$1.90 (down); \$1.98 becomes \$2.00 (up).	\$1.91 becomes \$1.90 (down, same as symmetrical); but \$1.98 becomes \$1.95 (rounded down, different from federal symmetrical method).
Legal / regulatory posture	No federally binding rule. Treasury notes state and local governments must amend sales-tax laws independently; Congress has considered nationwide symmetrical rounding bills but none have been enacted yet.	DATCP says it will use discretion in enforcement (Unfair Sales Act, Price Accuracy, Misleading Representations). Rounding up is discouraged due to consumer harm risk.
Applicability	Expected to apply to cash transactions only. Electronic payments continue to the exact cent.	Applies only to cash transactions where exact change cannot be provided.
Posting & consumer notice	Treasury suggests merchants plan for system and consumer-interface changes but does not require posting signage. Guidance largely high-level and transitional.	DATCP encourages posting clear signage at entrances and point-of-sale.

Continued on page 9



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SNAP Waiver Signed Into Law: What It is and How It Will Impact Wisconsin Grocers

Act 116 directs the Wisconsin DHS to seek federal approval for a FoodShare waiver that would restrict the use of SNAP benefits for the purchase of certain items, specifically candy and soft drinks. The bill requires DHS to continue seeking federal approval annually until a waiver is granted. The bill does not take effect unless and until federal approval is received. Until that time, existing FoodShare purchasing rules remain unchanged.

Definitions of “Candy” and “Soft Drink”

If a federal waiver is approved, DHS would be required to prohibit the purchase of:

- **Candy:** Defined as a solid, semi solid, or molded preparation made of sugar, sweeteners, or chocolate, with or without added ingredients such as flavorings, fruit, nuts, or flour, that is commonly marketed or recognized as candy, chocolate bars, chewing gum, or similar confectionery. This includes items such as chocolate bars, including those containing flour, hard candies, gummies, caramels, taffy, licorice, mints, and chewing gum, but excludes baked goods and bakery products such as cakes, cookies, muffins, brownies, pastries, bread, or similar items regardless of sweetener content.

- **Soft drinks:** Defined as a nonalcoholic beverage containing natural or artificial sweeteners and includes soda, pop, cola, energy drinks, sports drinks, and flavored water, as well as any product marketed or labeled as such regardless of ingredients. Excluded from the definition are beverages containing milk or milk substitutes such as soy or rice, beverages made of more than 50 percent fruit or vegetable juice by volume, coffee, and unsweetened tea.

Electronic Product Eligibility Platform

A significant amendment to Act 116 is the creation of a state managed electronic product eligibility platform. The bill requires DHS to contract for a centralized electronic system that determines FoodShare product eligibility. This platform would:

- Integrate with grocery store point of sale systems using product identifiers such as UPCs
- Communicate eligibility in real time to approve or deny purchases automatically

- Shift eligibility determinations away from store level interpretation to a state administered system

The intent is to reduce confusion for cashiers and customers by embedding eligibility rules directly into transaction processing rather than relying on signage, training, or manual enforcement by retailers.

Operational Implications for Grocers

While framed as a compliance tool, the platform raises several operational considerations for retailers, including system compatibility, ongoing product database updates as items change, and coordination among DHS, EBT processors, and store technology providers. The Legislative Fiscal Bureau notes that this platform represents a new operational component of the FoodShare program and includes authorized staffing and state funding to support implementation.

Why This Matters

The amended version of Act 116 moves beyond policy intent and into implementation, making grocery stores a direct point of interaction with state eligibility determinations. While a centralized system acknowledges the complexity of modern grocery inventories, it also raises important questions about cost, accuracy, and operational burden at the store level.

WGA will continue to monitor developments and share updates as the bill moves forward.

What is the Friend of the Grocer Award?

The Friend of the Grocer Award is the WGA's way of recognizing state legislators who demonstrate meaningful support for the grocery industry through their actions, engagement, and leadership.

Rather than focusing on party affiliation or campaign positions, the award is grounded in measurable, issue-based advocacy. It reflects how lawmakers show up for grocers during the legislative process and in their interactions with WGA members.

How the Award is Determined

WGA staff track legislative activity throughout the session using a structured scoring system

tied directly to grocery industry priorities. Points are awarded for actions that advance, defend, or meaningfully engage with WGA issues, including leadership on legislation, public advocacy, direct engagement with grocers, and more.

Additional discretion is applied for legislative leaders who play a decisive role in promoting, allowing, or stopping legislation that affects grocers.

Scoring and Recognition

Legislators receive a star rating based on their total score for the session:

- 5 Stars:** Exceptional leadership and consistent advocacy
- 4 Stars:** Strong and reliable supporter
- 3 Stars:** Solid engagement on key issues
- 2 Stars:** Limited support or engagement
- 1 Star or fewer:** Minimal to no support or engagement

Why It Matters

The Friend of the Grocer Award reinforces an important principle of WGA advocacy: relationships matter, engagement matters, and actions matter. By recognizing legislators who take the time to listen, learn, and lead on grocery issues, WGA encourages thoughtful policymaking that supports Wisconsin's food retailers and the communities they serve.

When will the 2025-26 Awards be Public?

The awards will be announced to the WGA membership around May 1 via email and included in the WGA Political Support Program packet in the mail.

WGA Encourages You to Present the Award at Your Store

WGA members are encouraged to consider hosting a Friend of the Grocer Award presentation at their store. Hosting an award is a powerful way to recognize legislators who have demonstrated genuine support for the grocery industry while also showcasing your store as a community anchor and local employer. WGA staff will coordinate logistics and support hosts throughout the process, making it an easy and impactful way to elevate grocery advocacy at the local level.



Andrew Martin from Meijer received the WGA Advocacy Award. The WGA Executive Committee and staff congratulated him at the WGA office in Madison.



State Representative Alex Dallman accepted a Friend of the Grocer Award from retail member Candie of Webster's Marketplace back in 2024!



WGA President/CEO Mike Semmann visited Certco, Inc. alongside President/CEO Amy Niemetscheck and Kristin Popp of Woodman's to discuss Wisconsin's grocery industry and connect with U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin about industry priorities and challenges.

A photograph of Steve Burkhardt, a middle-aged man with glasses and a dark blue zip-up sweater over a white collared shirt. He is smiling and standing in a grocery store aisle, with shelves of jars of sauce behind him. A name tag on his sweater reads "STEVE" and "HOMETOWN GROCERS".

WGA Chair's Career Journey: From Small-Town Store to Statewide Impact

By Michelle Stangler

Nearly four decades in the grocery business have taken Steve Burkhardt from bagging groceries in a small-town store to being a part of a leadership team that oversees stores across several Wisconsin communities. Today, as chair of the Wisconsin Grocers Association (WGA) Board of Directors, his passion for the industry remains as strong as it was when he first stepped into a store as a 16-year-old employee.

Burkhardt grew up shopping at a local IGA owned by the Skogen family — a store that later became part of Festival Foods. Encouraged by a friend to apply for a job, he started as a bagger and cart runner.

"The store I worked at was the hub of the community," he said. "The people I bagged for were neighbors. The people I worked with, I considered friends."

It didn't take long for him to realize he had found the right career.

"I enjoyed making a difference — making an impact," he said. "We always talk about what rings your joy bell. For me, it's helping people."

While attending college, Burkhardt was offered an opportunity to become a night supervisor and assistant store manager. He fell in love with the business so much that he dropped out of college and started working full-time at a new store built in Holmen.

Not long after, he became assistant manager of the first Festival Foods store in Onalaska — a major milestone for both the company and the community.

Over the years, Burkhardt's career has grown alongside the company. What began with a handful of small stores has expanded into a 50-plus-store organization. Along the way, he has developed strong partnerships throughout the industry.

"I've built a lot of close relationships with vendors, and I understand what their world is like. Our job is to help them win, and their job is to help us win."

Supporting Independent Grocers

Today, Burkhardt serves as vice president of operations for Hometown Grocers Inc. (HGI), a company that launched in 2021 with a mission to sustain independent grocery stores in smaller communities. He transitioned into the HGI role — overseeing nine independent stores — more than four years ago under the company's philosophy of supporting and growing smaller stores.

"It was time to see if we could keep some of these stores alive in small towns," he said. "A lot of independent grocers need the teamwork and support of a bigger staff — food safety, marketing, buying — things that aren't always possible with one or two stores."

It's elements like these that Burkhardt helps stores navigate. His job is to help the stores succeed, which he does by partnering with each store's leadership team, identifying problems, and meeting the needs of guests and associates.

In September 2025, this support was strengthened when Hometown Grocers Inc. and Festival Foods were acquired by Schnuck Markets, Inc.

"The Skogen & Schnucks families believe in supporting the industry — to support fellow

grocers, learn from other retailers, and be partners in the industry," he said. "They also share a deep-seeded support of people, from guests to associates alike."

Burkhardt mentioned how lucky he feels to be part of a talented, hard-working support team at Hometown Grocers. Much of his time is spent visiting stores and working directly with managers, and there are a lot of celebrations and high fives as he talks with both new and long-term associates.

"That's what my day is about — connecting with people and listening. It's important that people feel seen and that they know someone will always be there to listen and support them."

The Importance of WGA

Burkhardt became chair of the WGA Board of Directors in January 2026. The Skogen family, who also committed to furthering the WGA's goals, encouraged him to consider the position. Burkhardt's love for service and helping grocery stores led him to ultimately apply.

"The WGA adds a lot of value to our business and helps us understand what's going on around the state," he said. "We might have stores in 10 communities, but we don't know what happens in every community and how it's going to affect us."

Staying informed about labor challenges, policy changes, and food safety regulations is also critical. By connecting with and becoming part of an association dedicated to the needs of the industry, businesses can make sure they're proactive rather than reactive. That kind of preparedness, as Burkhardt noted, requires an ongoing focus on partnership.

"I'm really focused on how we find more partners and make the WGA stronger — keeping it a key voice in Madison and a resource for retailers looking for advice and guidance on how to solve problems that pop up every day."



Leadership and Family

Burkhardt's life has long been intertwined with Wisconsin's grocery industry. Nearly 30 years ago, he met his wife, Jessica, while working in the business. They've raised five children, some of whom now work in the industry themselves. His oldest son works as a produce manager at a Festival Foods in Oshkosh, and another son works as a cart runner at a Festival Foods in Appleton.

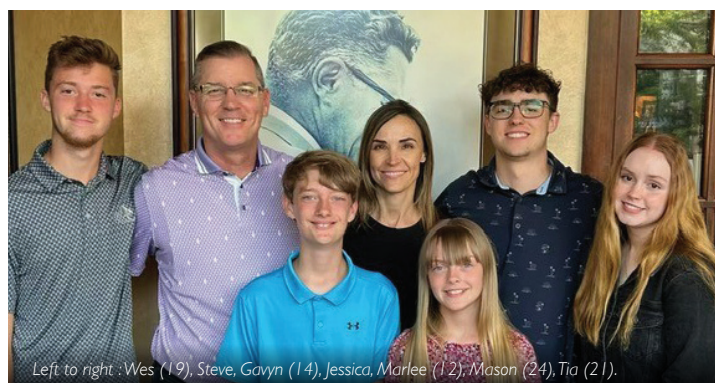
"It's kind of cool to share those moments with your kids," he said. "To see them be passionate about the business the same way I've always enjoyed it — the relationships and how you make a difference."

After nearly 40 years in the industry, the same energy that first drew Burkhardt into grocery continues to drive him — strengthening stores, supporting communities, and helping Wisconsin's grocery industry move forward. His leadership philosophy centers on understanding what teams are experiencing, and he has advice for others looking to lead in this way.

"Be a really good listener. Slow down. Retail — grocery especially — moves fast."



Steve and his son, Mason, who works in produce at a Festival Foods store.



Left to right: Wes (19), Steve, Gavin (14), Jessica, Marlee (12), Mason (24), Tia (21).

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Save the *Date*

2026 Wisconsin Grocers Association Events Calendar

February 10

Grocers in the Capitol Day (Concourse Hotel, Madison)

March 11

Day in the Field (Milford Hills, Johnson Creek)

April 2

2026 Awards: Nominations Open



May 1

2027 Board of Directors: Call for Nominations

May 12

WI Beef Council Farm Tour (Green Bay)



June 8

Northern Golf Outing (Greenwood Hills, Wausau)

July 22

Southern Golf Outing (Evergreen Golf Club, Elkhorn)

August 18

Innovation Expo & Owners/Key Personnel Meeting
(Wilderness Resort, WI Dells)

Retailers, register now for upcoming events!



WI Beef Council Farm Tour



Northern Golf Outing



Southern Golf Outing



Innovation Expo 2026

If you have any questions about WGA events or would like to sponsor an event, please contact Kendra Pahnke, Director of Development & Events, kpahnke@wisconsingrocers.com | (608) 210-3304



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Website: russdaviswholesale.com

Contact: Chris Maloney | (715) 410-1946

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Website: reyescocacola.com

Contact: Rick Roth | Richard.roth@glccd.com



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Legislative Conference 2026

This year's Legislative Conference, presented by the Wisconsin Grocers Association, Wisconsin Fuel & Retail Association, Wisconsin Retailers Alliance, and the Wisconsin Bakers Association, brought together more than 100 retailers and allied industry partners. It was an incredible day of collaboration as we met with state legislators to discuss the issues that matter most to Wisconsin's grocery industry, from supply chain stability to workforce development and the rising costs of doing business.

Attendees also heard a groceries and gasoline outlook from Director of the Marquette Law School Poll Charles Franklin and from the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection Secretary Randy Romanski on how the agency is working with the industry and resources available.



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THE nga SHOW 2026

Wisconsin was well represented at the National Grocers Association Show, with many retailers and grocery industry supporters in attendance. Congratulations to all of the Wisconsin winners, and a special shoutout to Vicheka Oum of Woodman's Food Market for representing our state in the national Best Bagger Competition!

Thanks to all the Wisconsin members who took time to attend and be involved. You showed the Badger State spirit as you represented your stores and the industry by planning the show, receiving awards, speaking, and competing in the Best Bagger Competition!



Above photos credit: NGA/Joey Curry Photography



Photo credit: NGA/Joey Curry Photography

Some of this year's award winners include:



Photo credit: NGA/Joey Curry Photography

Women Grocers of America Woman of the Year: Kristin Popp

Each year, Women Grocers of America (WGA) honors one extraordinary woman whose leadership, vision, and impact are shaping the future of the independent grocery industry.

Read more about Kristin Popp in the previous issue of Wisconsin Grocer.



The Shelby Report's Exceptional Independents Award:

Presented by Shelby Publishing, the Exceptional Independents Awards honor independent U.S. grocery operators whose innovation, dedication, and community leadership set them apart. The program recognizes those who embody the spirit of independent grocery — resilient, customer-focused, and deeply connected to the communities they serve.

Marc and Brenda Lois: Kenosha Piggly Wiggly
Doug Preston: Piggly Wiggly Union Grove
Nate Weitz: Trig's (T.A. Solberg Co., Inc.)

Additional not-pictured: Piggly Wiggly Midwest - Sheboygan



Above photos credit: NGA/Joey Curry Photography

NGA Creative Choice Award Winners:

Recognizes best marketing and merchandising programs in the independent grocery industry.

2026 NGA Creative Choice Merchandising Award Winners:

Local, Specialty & Emerging Products: Coborn's — Beer Brats with Castle Danger Brewery
Center Store & Beyond: Coborn's — Banner Program
Cross-Department Merchandising: Coborn's — Fall Festival

2026 Creative Choice Marketing Award Winners:

Multicultural Engagement: Sendik's Markets — Ethnic Festivals Partnership



This year's A Day in the Field was a great success! While the temperature was low, the spirits of those in attendance remained high.

The event began with the always-thrilling "5 Stand Flurry," where hunters braved the elements to take on 75 fast-moving sporting clays in a short, intense round of friendly competition. With guides and eager hunting dogs leading the way, the teams set off in pursuit of pheasants and chukars. Despite the challenging conditions, the hunt was a success. Birds were collected, cleaned, and packaged—ready for each hunter

to bring home as a memento of the day. After shaking off the chill, participants gathered back in the clubhouse for lunch and networking.

With proceeds supporting the WGA Education and Scholarship Foundation — now doing business as Grocery Retailers of Wisconsin (GROW) — the day was filled with camaraderie, friendly competition, and plenty of fun in the field.

Thank You Sponsors



Grocery Career Q+A

Not everyone's journey into the grocery business is the same. Some start with a first job bagging groceries, while others enter through family roots or career changes. What connects them is a shared drive to serve their communities.



Nate Vollmer

Director of Human Resources at Trig's

Q: Can you share how you got started in the grocery industry and what led you to your management position?

A: I started working at my local Sentry Foods grocery store as a bagger when I was a sophomore in high school. When I moved away for college, I started working for Trig's in Stevens Point and was given an opportunity to join the management team in human resources shortly after graduation.

Q: What has been the most rewarding part in helping operate a grocery store in your community, and how do you connect with local shoppers?

A: The grocery industry is very unique as it's one of the only businesses that you'll find in almost every town, village, and city in the state. This gives operators the opportunity to play a critical and central role in their communities. At Trig's, we are extremely focused on connecting with local shoppers by supporting all our local food pantries, school districts, veterans' groups, first responders, and other charities and foundations. We also do what we can to support local vendors throughout the state by supporting the sale of their products. Our "Love it Local" campaign is a big part of how we stay connected to our communities locally and statewide.

Q: How do you balance honoring tradition in a community grocery setting while also keeping up with new consumer trends and technology?

A: Understanding that it's a delicate balance is an important first step. We need to continue to stay in tune with technological updates, consumer trends, and expectations, while also providing and maintaining some traditional aspects of the guest experience in our stores. Whether it's online shopping using a smartphone app, a customized rewards program for our regular shoppers, a higher focus on ready-to-eat meals, or an aesthetically pleasing shopping experience with state-of-the-art merchandising, displays, and signage, it's important to not alienate our more traditional shoppers. Ensuring we continue to support printed ads, the right mix of product variety and selection (especially seasonally), and making our stores accessible for all ages is crucial. And of course, maintaining high standards of quality products and excellent guest service will always be a priority.

Front End Associate (1 yr)
Liquor Dept. Associate (2 yrs)
Human Resources Manager (3 yrs)
Assistant Store Director (3 yrs)
Human Resources Coordinator (2 yrs)
Director of Human Resources (8 yrs)



Tom Oestreicher

Department Manager at Jefferson Piggly Wiggly

Q: Can you share how you got started in the grocery industry and what led you to your management position?

A: Eight years ago, a good friend of mine offered me a job as a wrapper in the meat department he managed. Shortly after, I was promoted to utility, where I learned the basics of cutting, then on to head cutter about a year after that. I really enjoyed the work, and after a few years of being a cutter, I was offered the department manager position at my current store, Jefferson Piggly Wiggly.

Q: What has been the most rewarding part in helping operate a grocery store in your community, and how do you connect with local shoppers?

A: As my store is a smaller location, it affords me the opportunity to get to know the vast majority of customers. Making sure I've got the products they're looking for helps to keep them coming back when they have other options in town to shop from.

Q: What are some of the biggest challenges you've faced in the grocery business, and how have you adapted to changes in the industry over time?

A: Rising costs and shrinking margins are the biggest hurdles at the moment. Getting the most out of the deals you can find from distributors is the best way to combat it. At the end of the day, most consumers are looking at the price tag. If you can give them a good deal there, you can keep them coming back.

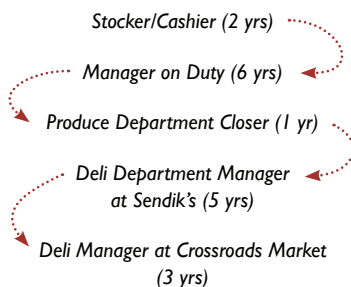
Q: What advice would you give to someone who wants to start a grocery career or become a store or department manager?

A: Commit to it. Not every day is going to be great. Getting through those rough patches makes the good days that much more rewarding.

Q: Looking back on your journey, what is one decision or experience that had the biggest impact on your success in this business?

A: Taking the wrapper position when it was offered to me. I actually turned it down a couple times before I accepted because I was content with my job at the time. Taking the chance and progressing my career has really paid off for me.

Wrapper (6 mo)
Utility (6 mo)
Cutter (1 yr)
Department Manager (6 yrs)



Megan Luther

Deli Manager at Crossroads Market

Q: Can you share how you got started in the grocery industry and what led you to your management position?

A: My career in the grocery industry began in 2012 while I was attending college and working at a small-town grocery store. I started as a stocker and cashier, but I quickly became more involved in the day-to-day operations across multiple departments. As I gained experience, I was promoted to manager on duty.

In 2014, the store owner's health began to decline, and he made the difficult decision to sell the business. Before leaving, he recommended me to another company, Sendik's Food Market. I applied for a position as a produce closer while continuing my education.

Shortly after joining Sendik's, I experienced a health issue that required me to move into a cashier role. During slower periods, as I recovered and regained my strength, I volunteered to help in other departments whenever possible. My work ethic and willingness to learn were quickly recognized by leadership, and I was again promoted to manager on duty. That promotion confirmed for me that the grocery industry was the career path I wanted to pursue.

In 2024, my family and I relocated to a new community, which led me to my current role as deli manager at Crossroads Market in Green Lake, Wisconsin, where I'm proud to continue serving customers and contributing to a local grocery store that plays an important role in the community.

Q: What advice would you give to someone who wants to start a career in the grocery industry?

A: My advice for anyone interested in a career in the grocery industry is to start by learning as much as possible about every department. There is no wrong place to start. The more experience you gain across different areas of the store, the better you'll understand how everything works together. A strong work ethic, willingness to help others, and a positive attitude can go a long way in this business. Don't be afraid to step up, ask questions, and take on new responsibilities. The grocery industry offers many opportunities for growth if you stay dedicated and passionate about serving customers and supporting your team. I found mine in the deli.

Q: Looking back on your journey, what is one decision or experience that had the biggest impact on your success in this business?

A: One of the most impactful experiences in my career was being promoted to manager on duty early on. That opportunity allowed me to see the bigger picture of store operations and gave me confidence in my leadership abilities. It also helped me realize how much I enjoyed working with a team, solving problems, and helping ensure the store runs smoothly for both employees and customers. That experience ultimately led me to pursue leadership roles and eventually become a department manager.



Jerry Conner

Store Owner, Stockman's of Osseo

Q: Can you share how you got started in the grocery industry and what led you to your leadership position?

A: It was the summer of 1976. My older brother applied to two grocery stores in town. He started at the Sentry, and the ShopRite called and my brother said, "My younger brother is looking." So, I got the job at ShopRite in Fort Atkinson. From that point followed, it had been my goal to become an owner of a grocery store.

Q: What has been the most rewarding part in helping operate a grocery store in your community, and how do you connect with local shoppers?

A: Searching the needs of the surrounding communities. I've always felt the best way to connect with my shoppers is being on the sales floor greeting and saying thank you, in addition to being involved with community activities.

Q: What are some of the biggest challenges you've faced in the grocery business, and how have you adapted to changes in the industry over time?

A: The biggest challenge is understanding that shopping priorities change along with technology. Are we staying with the times? Know what's working and throw away what's not!

Q: How do you balance honoring tradition in a community grocery setting while also keeping up with new consumer trends and technology?

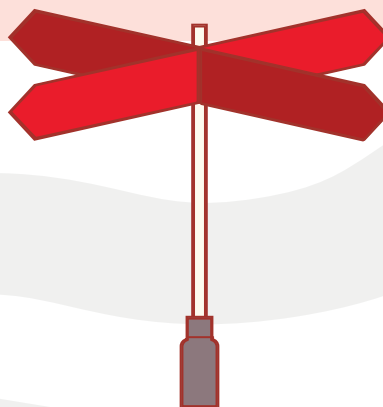
A: Tradition is very strong in our community, but any type of change we must communicate and inform our customers.

Q: What advice would you give to someone who wants to start a career in the grocery industry?

A: Start the career knowing you are constantly changing. Nothing in retail stays the same. We don't have a crystal ball, but go with your gut. Be positive, enthusiastic, and self-driven.

Q: Looking back on your journey, what is one decision or experience that had the biggest impact on your success in this business?

A: Throughout my 50 years in retail, I have surrounded myself with great people who taught me! You are constantly learning. Never stop learning.



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Around the State



Lake Mills Market Wins Great Citrus Showdown:

Lake Mills Market was named the winner of the Great Citrus Showdown competition. During a visit to the store, Marty from Russ Davis Wholesale surprised the team by announcing the first-place finish and presenting the award in person. The recognition highlights the store's strong citrus merchandising and the collaborative effort of the entire Lake Mills Market team.



Nilssen Group Raises Over \$30,000 for Local Food Pantries Through Holiday Campaign:

The Nilssen Group—including Dick's Fresh Market, Nilssen's Foods, and Wayne's Foods Plus—raised more than \$30,000 during its "Hope for the Holidays" round-up campaign held from November through December. Customers were invited to round up their grocery totals at checkout, with the proceeds benefiting local food pantries that support individuals and families in need throughout the communities the stores serve.



Metro Market Debuts In-Store Bar in Steven's Point:

The first of its kind in the central Wisconsin region, the in-store bar features three televisions for entertainment, 24 seats, and six bar seats for customers to enjoy a variety of drinks. Alternatively, customers can enjoy their drinks on the go and sip while they shop. Drink selections range from five rotating tap beers, red and white wine choices, hard seltzers, root beer, and non-alcoholic beer options. The menu also consists of a handful of food items. WGA's Member Engagement Coordinator Michelle Stangler was on-site for some of the special occasions!

Save-A-Label Program Generates Over \$106,000 for Community Organizations in 2025:

Associated Wholesale Grocers (AWG) announced that its Best Choice Family of Brands Save-A-Label® program donated \$106,508 to nearly 1,000 schools and nonprofit organizations across its 17-state footprint in 2025. The long-running program encourages shoppers to collect UPC labels from participating Best Choice brands, helping independent grocers and their customers turn everyday purchases into funding for local community initiatives.



\$172,150 Donated to Support Hunger Relief Efforts:

Over the holiday season, Pick 'n Save and Metro Market teamed up with MLB All-Star (and former Milwaukee Brewer) Curtis Granderson, expanding the 12-year partnership with Mariano's in Chicagoland. WGA President and CEO Mike Semmann joined in the festivities for the check presentation to Curtis with a \$172,150 donation, which includes \$27,700 for Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin! The special presentation also featured local Chefs Imani Graham and Britta Kramer, along with local vendor demos and more.



Marquette Players Draw Big Crowd at Saukville Piggly Wiggly: Piggly Wiggly in Saukville hosted a special event with Marquette Golden Eagles players Nigel James Jr., Damarius Owens, Adrien Stevens, and Royce Parham, drawing a large turnout.

Around the *State*



Metro Market Hosts PB&J Showdown Featuring Bucks Star Bobby Portis to Raise Awareness and Funds for Feeding America: Metro Market welcomed Bobby Portis and Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin for a fun PB&J sandwich-making competition with local kids, continuing Portis' long-standing commitment to fighting hunger in the community. Portis, who says Wisconsin now feels like home, brought his trademark energy and encouragement as young competitors tried to outscore him at the sandwich station.



Rupena's Hosts First In-House Valentine's Dinner: Rupena's Fine Foods debuted a new dining experience on Valentine's Day, welcoming guests to its first in-house dinner event. The evening highlighted the team's behind-the-scenes talents and marked the beginning of plans to host more special events in the future.



Watertown Piggly Wiggly Raises \$1,500: All proceeds raised will go to the American Legion Post 189 to benefit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall.



Main Street Market Piggly Wiggly Hosts Unforgettable Badger Rally: Main Street Market Piggly Wiggly welcomed Wisconsin Badger players, Bucky Badger, and the Wisconsin Marching Band for a high-energy Badger Rally that brought strong community turnout and in-store excitement.



Certco Event Brings Together Retailers: Certco's first Pathway to Profits event was attended by Certco retail member partners including store owners, managers, and store leadership teams throughout Certco's Midwest service area, including Wisconsin. Attendees started the day with a Certco, Inc. warehouse tour joined by WGA Member Engagement Coordinator Michelle Stangler, followed by presentations from leading industry experts in ESL's technologies and OTC medical benefits cards. The event included a panel discussion with Andrew Lange, Karl's Grocery in Edgewood, IA, and Nathan Heinz of Crossroads Market in Green Lake, WI, led by Certco's Whitney Atkins.



Maurer's Market Presented Kiwanis Wisconsin Dells with a Donation of More Than \$1,700: The donation was made possible through their round-up program at the register. Thanks to the generosity of Maurer's shoppers, those small spare-change contributions truly added up, creating a meaningful impact for kids and families throughout the Wisconsin Dells community.

Festival Foods COO Randy Munns Announces Retirement After Four Decades in Grocery: Festival Foods Executive Vice President and COO Randy Munns retired on February 13 after a 40-year career that included 35 years with the company. Munns played key roles in major store openings, guided marketing and merchandising strategy, and was honored as the Wisconsin Grocers Association's 2024 Grocer of the Year. Festival Foods also shared the promotion of Adam Whitney to chief merchant.



Board *Happenings*

The Wisconsin Grocers Association Board of Directors and the Grocery Retailers of Wisconsin Board of Governors—the WGA Education & Scholarship Foundation now doing business as GROW—met to discuss priorities and determine new ways to engage with Wisconsin’s grocery industry.



During the meeting, GROW’s Board of Governors approved a new mission statement: “Our mission is to advance Wisconsin’s grocery

industry by delivering innovative programs, educational resources, and strategic partnerships that enhance grocery operational excellence, support local businesses, and create long-term value for communities statewide.” The WGA Board of Directors also met to discuss upcoming events and explore additional ways to strengthen engagement with retailers and allied industry partners.



The executive committee also met at the Wisconsin Grocers Association office in Madison. If you’re ever near the State Capitol, feel free to come visit—we are located in the Capitol square!



Staff Found *Around the State*

Semmann Appointed to National Grocers Association Board of Directors:

The National Grocers Association has appointed Mike Semmann of the Wisconsin Grocers Association to its Board of Directors as part of its 2026 slate of new board members. Semmann joins a group of nine industry leaders selected to help guide the association’s strategic direction and support independent grocers nationwide. This appointment highlights Semmann’s growing leadership role within the national independent grocery community and reflects his ongoing work representing Wisconsin’s grocers on key industry and policy issues.



European Cheeses Sweep Top Honors at World Championship Cheese Contest in Madison:

The biennial competition, hosted by the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association, featured 3,375 dairy entries and is recognized as the world’s largest technical evaluation of dairy products. WGA’s Semmann confirmed the winner was very tasty and emphasized how fun it was to connect with the Wisconsin companies that earned 45 first-place finishes and several international companies that WGA members do business with!

WGA Outlines Industry Priorities at Piggly Wiggly Owners Association Meeting:

Mike Semmann delivered a presentation to the Piggly Wiggly Owners Association that highlighted emerging trends, operational challenges, and strategic opportunities for their franchisees. In a joint presentation with Charlie Russell and Mike Iskin (both WGA Board of Directors members), he emphasized collaboration, advocacy, and data-driven decision making as key tools to strengthen the industry. Thanks for the invitation!



Retailers, Vendors, and WGA Connect at Certco Spring Show: WGA staff spent the day connecting with retail and vendor members at the Certco Spring Show. Thank you to Certco for hosting us at the booth—what a great event!



Sharing the Importance of Local in Wisconsin's Grocery Industry

Creativity on social media—and connecting with consumers through their phones—was the goal of a recent grocery store hunt featuring Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) Secretary Randy Romanski and the 78th Alice in Dairyland, Sarah Hagenow. The pair visited Metcalfe's Market in Madison to search the shelves for products that are part of Something Special from Wisconsin, a program focused on highlighting genuine Wisconsin products.

Metcalfe's, part of SpartanNash, is known for its strong focus on local goods. Its Food Miles program uses signage to highlight how far products travel to reach the store, encouraging customers to shop local and support Wisconsin farmers and suppliers.

The team spread the word on multiple social media platforms, including channels for the DATCP and Alice in Dairyland, to highlight the unique and engaging ways grocery stores can tell their stories through social media. Additional content included insights shared on the Something Special from Wisconsin program and an interview with Kelsey Peyton, store director at Metcalfe's Hilldale. During their efforts, Secretary Romanski—who is no stranger to the grocery industry—even reflected on his own early experience stocking dairy and frozen foods when he was a teenager.

"Being a lifelong Wisconsin resident in America's Dairyland, I found a great sense of connection to the world of food by being connected in a way with the grocery store," he said.

At the Wisconsin Grocers Association, we believe spotlighting local products is integral to supporting communities. To make sure this continues to be a central focus, the 2026 Innovation Expo will include a new addition called Local Lane, featuring vendors from across Wisconsin in a dedicated hallway in the middle of all the events.

The Food Finance Institute (FFI) will also host its Food Finance Forum the same day as the WGA Innovation Expo in select rooms at the Wilderness, further promoting Wisconsin's local food movement and allowing more connection.

Wisconsin's culture of connection is part of what helps keep local businesses strong and supported. It's a mindset that Romanski summed up well with his thoughts on the industry as a whole.

"We are connected to consumers all across the state of Wisconsin every day, and the goal of our agency, of the businesses, of the consumers, is the same thing. Happy, healthy customers."



Retailers attending the Wisconsin Grocers Association Innovation Expo in 2026 will have a unique opportunity to discover new, locally made products and connect directly with the entrepreneurs behind them, supporting more distinctive assortments and meeting growing consumer demand for local. At this year's Expo, the new Local Lane, sponsored by the Food Finance Institute (FFI), will feature vendors from across Wisconsin in a dedicated hallway in the middle of all the events. This addition is designed to make it easier to explore innovative, homegrown products and build relationships with emerging brands from across the state.

Local vendors can learn more using the QR code below:



In addition, FFI will host its Food Finance Forum the same day as the WGA Innovation Expo in select rooms at the Wilderness, offering expanded programming and insights from experts across multiple food finance disciplines for the vendor community.

From discovering the next standout local product to strengthening supplier networks, this year's WGA Innovation Expo continues to be an opportunity for Wisconsin grocers to stay competitive, connected, and forward-looking.

Welcome *New Members*

Thank you to our newest WGA members! Your membership supports the Wisconsin grocery industry and helps connect you with local retailers, gain industry insights, and have your voice heard at the Capitol.

Now is a great time to join the Wisconsin Grocers Association! The WGA is the only trade association dedicated to advancing Wisconsin's retail grocery industry. Your support helps to maintain a healthy and

vibrant retail community through industry representation before regulators and opinion leaders, including local and national decision-makers.

Your membership ensures you remain at the forefront of Wisconsin's grocery industry, strengthening your business connections and market visibility.

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New Product *Spotlight*

Valley Cooperative Association

Belgian Crunch Cake Squares: White cake with buttercream finished with cinnamon Belgian crunch cookie pieces. Our cake squares are packaged in a convenient 6-pack and generously coated in smooth, creamy buttercream frosting. Ideal for bakery cases or catering trays, they are a rich and indulgent dessert option.



Toga Cookies: These soft, filled pastries are a hybrid between a scone, a biscuit, and a cookie. Available in three flavors: blueberry lemon, cinnamon, and cranberry with white chocolate, these filled cookies are sure to wow your customers with something new and unique! Cookies are sold as frozen dough pucks.



Brioche Tuxedo Buns: Help your customers take their burgers to the next level with these Brioche Burger Buns with Tuxedo Sesame Seeds. This premium bun is soft and crispy in all the right ways and beautifully topped with black and white sesame seeds.



AWG Launches 63 New Private Brand Products in Q1 2026

Associated Wholesale Grocers is introducing 63 new private brand items across its Best Choice, Superior Selections by Best Choice, Tippy Toes, TopCare, and Simply Done lines in Q1 2026, spanning food, baby, wellness, and household categories. The expansion includes the debut of four Tippy Toes baby formulas and dozens of new pantry, electrolyte, and home-care products aimed at helping independent grocers boost margins while offering shoppers lower-cost alternatives to national brands.



Celebrates 100 Years



Sendik's Food Market, a longtime community fixture and a beloved brand in Milwaukee's grocery landscape, is celebrating 100 years in business. The business began in 1926 as a produce market located in Shorewood owned by the Balistreri family. What began as a family selling fruits and vegetables in 1926 has become one of the Milwaukee area's favorite places to shop.

"Going generations back, our family had a passion for quality food and appreciating

customers," said Ted Balistreri, one of the Balistreri family members still active in the ownership and operation of the company. "All of the same principles that our grandparents and parents built the business on still exist today."

An Early Promise

Over decades and generations, Sendik's has grown its footprint based on one guiding principle: treat customers like family. That promise resonated with shoppers, and the



company expanded to serve communities from Grafton to Franklin to Oconomowoc. Today, the company operates 17 stores and employs over 2,000 people.

100 Years of Community Impact

In addition to being a key employer, Sendik's believes in giving back to the very same communities that supported the company through the years. Stars and Stripes Honor Flight, Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin, and the MACC Fund have been charitable partners of Sendik's for many years. The company also believes in supporting local organizations, from school activities to community fundraisers, and has made supporting local suppliers a main priority.

Looking Ahead

Sendik's has become part of the fabric of local communities, and their commitment to providing high quality foods and unmatched service will continue well beyond the first 100 years.

"We believe our people are the reason for our success," Ted Balistreri said. "Our associates share our belief in treating every customer like family. That's what has kept people coming back for generations."



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