

From the First Female Supermarket Manager to President and CEO, Carole Bitter Leads the Industry for Women

Carole Bitter grew up in a time when opportunities in management for women in the grocery industry did not exist. Even as the daughter of supermarket owners, she never considered running the family business because the heir apparent was a male cousin.



Bitter's grandfather came to the United States from Austria-Hungary at the turn of the century and landed at Ellis Island at 17 with very little money. He found his way to McKeesport, Pennsylvania, and then to Butler, Pennsylvania. He started as a blacksmith, but after severing two fingers, he turned to peddling produce and sewing notions from a pushcart. He graduated to a horse and buggy and finally landed a small store in Lyndora, Pennsylvania, an enclave for recent Eastern European immigrants.

Growing up in the grocery business, Bitter spent her summers working in her family's stores for spending money and learning about each department. After high school, she attended Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, graduating with an A.B. in English and psychology. After graduation in 1967, she attended the Supermarket Institute Convention, now the Food Marketing Institute (FMI) convention, with her parents and was encouraged by several industry leaders to consider the grocery business as her career. She enrolled in the Cornell Food Industry Management Program—the first woman to ever enroll—and became the first woman to graduate from the program. Dr. Wendell Earle became a great mentor to her and encouraged her further success in the grocery field and in her further education.

After graduation in 1968, Bitter began the interview process with grocery industry companies, both retail and CPG. At this time, most companies did not consider hiring women for management and would not even interview them. In fact, Bitter started using her initials on the interview signup sheets to get callbacks for interviews. After much persistence, she was finally given a chance by Bob Bidwell and Carol Goldberg



Carole Bitter

Boston Supermarket Division and resident supervisor store manager. Bitter recalls several humorous experiences being a woman in these positions, including meat safety girdles not fitting a woman's size and delivery supervisors calling the store asking for the store manager and when she answered, supervisors hanging up not realizing that there was actually a woman in that capacity at the store. Bitter also earned her master's degree from Northeastern University in Boston in 1974 during her time there.

In 1976, Bitter was asked to come and rejoin her family business, Friedman's Freshmarkets, as president, where she currently serves today.

"Being an independent operator has allowed me to serve our communities and try to make them stronger, while allowing our associates to grow in their job functions," Bitter says.

Friedman's Freshmarkets is a 115-year-old, privately-owned family business that operates four stores in western Pennsylvania. Even with the challenges of running her own company, Bitter completed her doctoral dissertation titled, "Electronic Funds Transfer Systems in the Retail Industries: Past, Present and Future," at Cornell University in agricultural economics in the spring of 1981.

at Stop & Shop Cos. Bidwell hired her in their management training program and within two years, Bitter was the first female, as well as the youngest, supermarket manager in the 160-store chain.

During her five years at Stop & Stop, Bitter served in many capacities, including reserve store manager, assistant to the VPs of advertising and marketing services, supermarket manager, assistant to the grocery sales manager of the

Bitter has many outstanding firsts within her long and distinguished career: first woman supermarket manager, first female president of the Butler Chamber of Commerce, first female FMI Board member, first female FMI vice chair, first female NGA chair, etc.

Through these accomplishments, mentoring is something Bitter is very passionate about. "I'm proud that, working with a local organization that works with at-risk teens, we accepted into employment a young man that completed the mentoring/training program of this group and this young man was just promoted to store co-manager trainee with our company," Bitter said.

Over the years Bitter also has mentored hundreds of men and women from as far away as Stockholm, Sweden, and Argentina. She also has accepted the invitation to join the Presidents Council of Cornell Women (PCCW), an advisory group whose goal is to enhance the role of women in the life of the university.

When asked what advice she would give to up-and-coming women in the industry, Bitter said today's grocery industry is an even playing field—something that has changed in 40 years.

"I would give the same advice to both men and women: Get the best possible education with an advanced degree with a layered approach to education and work. This will teach a great work ethic, teach industry experience and you will learn to speak to customers while seeing a full range of job opportunities."

Bitter has truly paved the way for women in the grocery industry and continues to give back to those not only within her own company but those in her community. We appreciate her contributions to women and throughout the entire grocery industry.

Are you passionate about the female independent grocer? Check out Women Grocers of America (WGA) membership at: nationalgrocers.org/who-we-are/nga-special-programs/wga.

