2017 TOP 100

Consumers weigh in on the top brands including brick-n-mortar, online and overall customer experience.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Welcome to Retail Customer Experience’s 2017 Top 100 report, providing insight on which retailers (online, brick-and-mortar and omnichannel players) are doing the job when it comes to providing consumers a robust and rewarding customer experience.

In past years, we have approached our report in different ways. One year we provided a pure list of brands; another year we changed it up to focus on four categories (best customer service, best online experience, best brick-and-mortar experience, best overall customer experience).

This year, we tweaked those categories to be more specific, in regard to feedback from those polled. We wanted to know what retailers ranked best on complaint/issue response and ease of checkout, as well as offered the best experience in retail brick-and-mortar when it comes to store presentation and ease of product return.

And, like last year, given the advancements in mobile commerce, we again included questions pertaining to use of a mobile device while shopping and what consumers are using such devices for in the retail environment.

As our 2016 Retail Future Trends Report revealed, 2016 was once again a year of innovation amid a competitive time for retailers that are online, offline and moving into the omnichannel realm. Mobile, as well as data analytics and Internet of Things (IoT), hit home with retailers striving to drive a better customer experience.

Consumers still are focused on a retailer’s website for product research; however, as this Top 100 report illustrates, they’re also increasingly using smartphones and other mobile devices.

The trends data revealed 35 percent of consumers believe it is very important for a retailer to have both a brick-and-mortar and online presence. That consumer expectation may be a big reason Amazon, which again took home the top honor in this Top 100 survey, is moving into the brick-and-mortar realm after over two decades of pure e-commerce strategy.

The insight from both the trends study and our latest Top 100 report makes for a compelling read for anyone in the retail industry or striving to provide technology and tools for retailers.

As mentioned above, this year’s Top 100 winner is, no surprise, Amazon. And it’s hard to imagine Jeff Bezos’ company dropping off the top perch anytime soon.
Yet it could be sooner than many expect considering the neck-and-neck race between Target and Wal-Mart, which take second or third place depending on the survey category results.

Both are doing well in terms of customer response, yet Wal-Mart beat out Target in best shopping experience. The two top-tier brands were literally tied in best brick-and-mortar experience on aspects from sales support to ease of checkout.

All three top leaders in our Top 100 report share a long list of successful strategies and boast one particular trait: they are not afraid of changing or embracing technology to meet consumer expectations.

Thanks to those retailers, and the entire list of 100 (which boasts some new names), this is an incredibly fun and innovative time to be part of the retail customer experience.

It also is prime time to attend the upcoming Interactive Customer Experience (ICX) Summit, happening June 5-7 in Dallas. The annual event draws top retailers and experts to share innovations and insight on how technology is transforming the customer experience across the retail sector. Topics include everything from how IoT is taking deep root to customer-facing robots and designing a loyalty program that works.

Thank you for reading Retail Customer Experience and for downloading this special report. Also, we would like to thank Confirmit, whose sponsorship allowed us to provide this report to you at no charge.

Enjoy the read. Here’s to another great year of innovation and advancement in retail customer experience!

Judy Mottl
Editor, Retail Customer Experience
Amazon

**Founded:** July 1995  
**Headquarters:** Seattle  
**Workforce:** 180,000 in 2016

**Quirky tidbit:** In the company’s early years, founder Jeff Bezos, his wife, MacKenzie, and Amazon’s first employee, Shel Kaphan, held meetings inside their local Barnes & Noble store. (MSN.com)

Once again, Amazon takes the award for top retailer — this year, that means both online and offline — in Retail Customer Experience’s annual Top 100 Retailers survey, as it’s the year Amazon established a retail grocery location.

Amazon easily beat out top competitors Wal-Mart and Target as the retailer providing the fastest response to a consumer issue or complaint, providing the best shopping experience and the best overall shopping experience. It’s also the top choice for consumers with money to spend.

Why is Amazon always winning when it comes to customer experience? Because it is always innovating, pushing forward into new segments — from drone delivery to its artificial intelligence (AI) Echo device capability — and has no intention of slowing down on any of its many strategy fronts.

In early December 2016, it debuted its initial brick-and-mortar small grocery store concept, called Amazon Go, and it is prepping at least two other brick-and-mortar store formats.

Amazon Go is a no-waiting, no-line, no-checkout grocery store experience, called “Just Walk Out,” and happening at the Amazon Go store in Washington state. Customers simply shop and then leave the store with a virtual cart and checkout experience happening online.

But that wasn’t the only retail advancement in 2016. Amazon also launched and already expanded its one-hour restaurant delivery service as well as a one-hour drugstore delivery option.

While that strategy is likely top of mind for investors and the retail segment, Amazon has been extremely busy over the past year advancing business into nonretail segments as well. Consider the Amazon AI services push, and its original entertainment programming strategy is garnering big awards and big attention from those in the entertainment sector.

Amazon boasts more than 70 fulfillment centers in the U.S. and employs more than 90,000 full-time workers. That number will jump quickly, as the company plans to create more than 100,000 U.S. jobs in the next 18 months — with its workforce spiking from 180,000 in 2016 to over 280,000 by mid-2018.

In a nutshell, Amazon is doing what no other retailer, online or offline, has ever done. That’s why even Target, a top competitor, acknowledges its domination.

As RetailCustomerExperience.com reported in January 2017, Mike McNamara, Target’s executive vice president, chief information officer and chief digital officer, described Amazon as “fantastic, phenomenal and our fiercest competition going forward,” during a talk at the National Retail Federation’s Retail’s Big Show in New York City.

It wasn’t the first time Target leaders have paid respects to Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos and his company and it likely won’t be the last, given Amazon’s penchant for sticking to its initial four principles: customer obsession rather than competitor focus, passion for invention, commitment to operational excellence and long-term thinking.

As RetailCustomerExperience.com blogger Chris Petersen pointed out this year, Amazon is all about disruption.

“The very nature of their strategy is disrupting the status quo,” he wrote, noting Amazon’s foray into fashion this past year, its Fulfillment by Amazon for retailers selling off its platform, new transportation strategies from drones to ships and, not to be ignored, its cloud services.

“Does Amazon make mistakes? Absolutely,” Petersen wrote, noting that what it does best is “fail rapidly.”

“They take baby steps quickly … they learn by getting merchants into their marketplace,” he stated. “Amazon does more than learn how to incrementally improve a piece. They are masters at integrating strategy based upon improving customer experience and value.”

There’s no indication those baby steps will slow down, and it’s likely the company will simply get better at integrating strategy to keep improving the customer experience.

Just consider how it has advanced its Pay with Amazon strategy. As Patrick Gauthier, vice president of the business unit, told Mobile Payments Today editor Will Hernandez, Amazon took the pay strategy outside of its walls purely to solve consumer pain points with online checkout.

“Everything Amazon does starts not from what we envision to be, it starts with a customer pain point we’ve identified and we’re working backwards from it,” Gauthier told Hernandez in the two-part interview series. “And that leads to counterintuitive conclusions.”
Walmart

**Founded:** 1962

**Headquarters:** Bentonville, Arkansas

**Workforce:** 2.3 million associates worldwide; 1.5 million in the U.S.

**Retail locations:** 11,500 stores

**Quirky tidbit:** Founder Sam Walton opened his first Wal-Mart at the age of 44.

In the neck-and-neck race to the top in retail customer experience, Wal-Mart is just slightly winning against Target to attain the second coveted spot behind leader Amazon. It beat out Target in best customer response performance and best shopping experience (though it should be noted that eBay topped both Wal-Mart and Target in that category), and it tied with Target when it came to best brick-and-mortar experience.

The tight race for being the best in customer experience is directly tied to advanced innovations that retailers are undertaking and expanding on within the store and within their enterprises. Yet 2016 didn’t kick off well for Wal-Mart, given the world’s biggest retailer dropped two points on the American Customer Satisfaction Index, which put Wal-Mart in last place among health care and supermarket retailers.

But Wal-Mart clearly didn’t let that statistic deter its technology and customer experience focus in 2016, and its high marks with those surveyed illustrates that point.

As RetailCustomerExperience.com reported in May 2016, Wal-Mart is intent on battling Amazon and debuted two-day shipping and reduced its ShippingPass subscription service to $49 a year, half of Amazon’s Prime membership fee.

A big focal point for Wal-Mart, as well as many of its retail competitors, has been advancing the mobile commerce experience.

As RetailCustomerExperience.com reported last August, Wal-Mart’s customers are expecting a smooth and easy experience, and Wal-Mart is responding to meet that expectation. Two-thirds of Wal-Mart shoppers use a smartphone, and 50 percent of those use the device in a Wal-Mart location.

“The speed of customer expectation is as dramatic as I’ve ever seen,” said Daniel Eckert, senior vice president of Wal-Mart Services, during his kickoff keynote address at Networld Media Group’s 2016 CONNECT Mobile Innovation Summit.

That was the compelling reason Wal-Mart, in July 2016, rolled out Walmart Pay, a homegrown mobile-payment feature within the Wal-Mart mobile app.

Wal-Mart is focused on using technology to improve the customer experience, Eckert said, noting, “It’s about saving stress, time, customer pain points.”

But mobile is just one tech focal point. In mid-November 2016, Wal-Mart began tracking two products using blockchain technology in a test involving thousands of packages shipped to multiple stores. The technology may help Wal-Mart deliver food to stores faster, reducing spoilage and waste.

In June 2016, the mega-retailer announced it had deployed the My Productivity app for all in-store management team members. With a few clicks, managers can ignite business processes to restock specific items, access real-time sales data and trends, and answer customer questions.

Wal-Mart also was busy buying technology last year. In August 2016, it bought newcomer e-tailer Jet.com for $3 billion in cash and $300 million of Wal-Mart shares.

When it comes to store design and enhancement, Wal-Mart, like Target, has been busy changing store footprint and strategy. While it sold its failed Walmart Express stores last year to Dollar General Stores, it’s still operating 667 smart format locations.

As RetailCustomerExperience.com blogger Bryan Pearson wrote in August 2016, Wal-Mart has met success in its small-store strategy, and the trend, overall, likely may impact the mega-store that many communities and consumers have long been familiar with.

“The operators of the nation’s best-recognized mega stores have been finding success in smaller formats as they maneuver their way into densely populated, physically limited urban areas,” Pearson wrote.

For its part, Wal-Mart has a clear view of what it believes retail and customer experience should be all about.

“We have the opportunity to reimagine retail again,” stated Doug McMillon, Wal-Mart president and CEO, during a shareholders’ meeting in June 2016. In a blog post on his company’s site, McMillon mused about what retail will be in a decade.

“Today, the pace of change is rapid,” he wrote. “Ten years ago most customers were reading about the original iPhone, and wondering whether it would be useful. Now they expect to order something on their mobiles, have it delivered or pick it up in store — often on the same day, in a few hours, or even in a few minutes. It’s up to retailers to adapt to these changes — and in some areas even lead the way — or they’ll fall behind and disappear.”
Target

**Founded:** 1902  
**Headquarters:** Minneapolis  
**Workforce:** 341,000 team members  
**Retail locations:** 1,803 U.S. locations

**Quirky tidbit:** Target maintains two corporate command centers — hubs using tools such as news and weather monitoring, travel tracking and satellite imagery — in Minneapolis and Bangalore, India.

Target is neck-and-neck with Wal-Mart, and on the heels of uber-retailer Amazon, when it comes to customer experience and attaining a top honor in providing the best brick-and-mortar shopping experience — which includes everything from store cleanliness to ease of checkout and product returns.

A prime reason for its ongoing dominance in retail is the company's commitment to technology and providing an enhanced mobile consumer experience by building up its app and supply chain strategies.

The company has been dedicated to fulfilling a corporate leadership “surgical” approach, as outlined by CEO Brian Cornell in 2015, to examine and improve everything relating to the retail experience.

This February, Target aims to debut new store features and designs via its Open House, a connected product concept store showcasing smart home technology, which was announced in summer 2015.

Over 150,000 visitors have interacted with the Open House's Internet of Things (IoT) innovations. The initiative is all about research and development relating to the connected consumer. One of the new features to be installed includes an updated interactive space, boasting vertically mounted touchscreen monitors and about 70 IoT products.

Yet that’s just one strategy reflecting the retailer’s technology commitment.

As Mike McNamara, Target’s executive vice president, chief intelligence officer and chief digital officer, revealed early in 2017, Target is no longer a laggard when it comes to digital technology.

Target budgeted $1.8 billion for 2016 on supply network and technology, and $2.5 billion for 2017, according to an ABC News report.

That investment clearly paid off as Target's e-commerce site suffered no downtime during even its busiest days in the 2016 holiday season.

The year 2016 was focused on the consumer, from refreshing loyalty programs to boosting personalized offerings, as Cornell noted in an interview on Target's corporate website.

And the payoffs are clear, especially when it comes to Target's mobile app Cartwheel, which spurred $3 billion in sales.

But the mobile focus isn’t hindering the in-store experience strategy, noted Casey Carl, chief strategy and innovation officer for Target, at the Shoptalk conference.

“Stores are as vital today as ever before,” Carl said. “We have to up our game to stay relevant.” He explained that Target views its stores as a community gathering place for consumers and that stores aren’t just a place to display products.

“We won't invest prematurely; it’s not about chasing technology for technology sake,” Carl said. “Mobile at this point is playing a 100 percent role. Every consumer is different, so we have to make it a truly one-on-one engaging experience.”

As RetailCustomerExperience.com blogger Bryan Pearson noted in a post in May 2016, Target debuted new in-store wellness sections, called Connected Health, providing consumers with the ability to track personal health data on mobile devices.

“Target is reformulating health care by making it a consumable retail product, by way of smartphone,” Pearson wrote. “As any good retailer knows, the purchase of one retail product sheds light on the needs for others. Done well, a retailer can turn health care into wealth shares.”

During 2016, Target also debuted its first flexible-format store in New York, boasting a broad assortment of apparel, beauty products, home goods and grocery items as well as a Chobani café.

And while the 2016 holiday season produced a mixed sales and revenue result, Target's CEO revealed in an online interview that digital sales growth jumped more than 40 percent in December. He attributed the growth to a better customer experience and enhanced e-commerce stability.

“We’re making big strides in improving the shopping experience in every channel, evolving our supply chain and technology in support of flexible fulfillment, and bringing our flexible format stores to more and more guests in dense urban and suburban markets,” he said.
Costco
Headquarters: Issaquah, Washington
Workforce: 117,000 employees
Retail Locations: 700+ locations

Quirky Tidbit:
In the midst of continued growth—Costco plans to open 16 new locations in 2017—the membership-based warehouse club maintains a steady focus on experience. If you’ve shopped at Costco, you’ve likely been enticed by bountiful sample stations, or diverted from your shopping list by an eye-catching merchandise display. That’s all part of Costco’s experiential approach—and it’s something that company leadership is banking on to compete with online retailers.

“It’s fun to go to Costco in a way that online retailers cannot duplicate,” wrote Daniel B. Kline for The Motley Fool. “That, coupled with tying members into deals in which buying more helps them recoup their up-front costs, creates a sort of perfect storm that makes customers loyal to the brick-and-mortar chain.”

That loyalty continues to pay off (no pun intended) in revenue growth. In the past fiscal year, Costco reported total sales of $116.1 billion. And in December 2016, Costco’s sales increased 5 percent compared to 2015. According to the company, Costco was the first company to grow from zero to $3 billion in sales in less than six years.

Continued growth amid a turbulent retail landscape isn’t always easy, but Costco’s focus on experience keeps customers coming back—including meeting evolving expectations. Consider this example: earlier in 2016, Costco began working with a partner in San Diego to help farmers buy land and equipment to grow organic food products, all in an effort to meet increased in-store demand for organic food and high-quality supply. The initiative is expected to expand, resulting in a greater supply of organic products throughout Costco stores.

eBay
Founded: 1995
Headquarters: San Jose, California
Workforce: 11,600 employees

Quirky Tidbit:
“If it exists in the world, it probably is for sale on eBay.”

That’s a bold statement on behalf of the company, but considering some of eBay’s statistics—167 million active buyers and 1 billion live listings—and it becomes not just a tagline, but also a concise statement of purpose.

What’s even more impressive than the company’s audience and sales volume is its tireless pursuit of innovative tools and ideas to make the buying and selling process more efficient and enjoyable than ever. In the last year, eBay has announced several acquisitions, initiatives and partnerships, each a thoughtful step forward in adding new functionality or enhancing existing capabilities.

One of the bigger highlights in 2016: eBay’s API initiative, which launched with a revamped API platform and 10 new standards-based APIs in October to make buying and selling easier. More APIs are expected to debut this year in two categories: sell APIs, which help sellers manage their eBay businesses with third-party tools; and buy APIs, which enable customers to buy anywhere without visiting eBay.com.

“The new APIs are an example of how eBay is leveraging technology to accelerate and disrupt commerce,” according to the company.

Other notable accomplishments in 2016 include acquisitions of Ticketbis and Ticket Utils to expand ticketing access, choices and management; and SalesPredict, an Israel-based company that uses advanced analytics to predict a customer’s buying behavior. The company introduced a wine category, and eBay Australia launched the world’s first virtual reality department store. eBay also teamed up with Gimlet to launch Open for Business, a podcast that helps people start their own companies.

eBay’s ongoing investments in technology and tools continue to help differentiate the company in an increasingly crowded online retail marketplace. During the 2016 holiday season, eBay was the second-most visited eCommerce site in the U.S.—an impressive feat, and a satisfying way to cap off a busy and successful year.
Best Buy

Founded: 1966
Headquarters: Minneapolis, Minnesota
Workforce: 125,000+ employees
Retail Locations: 1,500+ stores in North America

Quirky Tidbit:
Best Buy hit an important milestone in 2016: the company turned 50! Yet that was only one of several exciting highlights in what proved to be a busy year for the electronics retailer.

If you’ve used Best Buy’s Geek Squad in the last year, you might have noticed a brand refresh that debuted in April 2016 and included a switch to Toyota Prius hybrids for Geek Squad’s service vehicles.

Best Buy also continued its focus on providing customers the products that keep them on the leading edge of the rapidly evolving tech industry. The company launched Ignite, which features the latest technology from entrepreneurs and startups in consumer electronics. Best Buy Ignite is a featured product category on the website, letting customers browse a number of categories that include fitness, transportation, home automation, travel and wearables.

After years of build-up, virtual reality hit the mainstream in 2016—and Best Buy was ready. The company was the first to host free Oculus Rift demos, and was also among the first retailers to host PlayStation VR demos after the hotly anticipated headsets hit the market in spring 2016.

Best Buy isn’t only focused on delivering innovative electronics and technology to its customers; the company also makes it a priority to help increase access to technology (and related skills) in the community. In 2016, Best Buy continued its Teen Tech centers program, in which state-of-the-art facilities are opened (often in partnership with existing youth centers) to give students a place to learn skills like digital filmmaking, 3-D design, coding and app development. Last year, Best Buy opened four Teen Tech centers, bringing the total to 11—and the company plans to open nine additional centers in 2017.

Fun fact: According to Best Buy’s website, more than 70 percent of the U.S. population lives within 15 minutes of a Best Buy store.

Kohl’s

Founded: 1962
Headquarters: Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin
Workforce: 140,000 employees
Retail Locations: 1,100+ stores throughout the U.S.

Quirky Tidbit:
In late 2014, Kevin Mansell, Kohl’s chairman, CEO and president, unveiled the Greatness Agenda, an aggressive multi-year plan designed to make Kohl’s more successful by accomplishing three primary goals: increase sales to $21 billion, be in the 90th percentile for associate engagement and best-in-class for customer engagement, according to a company press release.

Those three goals are intended to be met by the end of this year, and in 2016, Kohl’s continued to make progress. Enhancing Kohl’s omni-channel capabilities has been among the company’s top priorities, as customer demand for a seamlessly integrated online and brick-and-mortar retail experience keeps rising.

In 2015, Kohl’s launched several omni-channel initiatives, and continued to add functionality in 2016. October saw the introduction of Kohl’s Pay, an integrated commerce experience that integrates the Kohl’s Charge credit card into the Kohl’s mobile app. Thus, more than 25 million active cardholders can pay for in-store purchases directly from their mobile devices, while also easily combining applicable offers, Kohl’s Cash and Yes2You rewards to “simplify the checkout and payment experience,” according to Kohl’s.

The last year also saw the creation and fulfillment of several real estate plans to give customers more of the products they want and help boost sales. Throughout 2016, Kohl’s piloted seven new smaller-format stores; added two Off/Aisle pilot stores in Wisconsin; and entered the outlet market with 12 FILA outlet stores (FILA is one of several Kohl’s proprietary brands). The company also closed on the purchase of a new eCommerce distribution center in Plainfield, Indiana, which is expected to open in summer 2017.

“We are committed to providing an easy experience to Kohl’s customers and a key part of this is being able to deliver amazing products to them more quickly and efficiently,” said Sonia Chawla, Kohl’s chief operating officer, in a release.
Bed Bath & Beyond

**Founded:** 1971

**Headquarters:** Union, New Jersey

**Workforce:** 62,000 employees

**Retail Locations:** 1,504 stores

**Quirky Tidbit:**

Two big acquisitions largely defined 2016 for Bed Bath & Beyond. In June, the retailer announced the acquisition of One Kings Lane, an online home furnishings and décor retailer that attracted a significant and loyal following thanks to frequent flash sales. The acquisition is expected to benefit both companies: by boosting the exposure and promotion of One Kings Lane and giving Bed Bath & Beyond additional tools and insight to grow Bed Bath & Beyond's identity as a market expert.

"...One Kings Lane will serve as a cornerstone for Bed Bath & Beyond's growing offerings in furniture and home décor, and together we will be able to do even more for and with our collective customers wherever, whenever and however they wish to interact with us, and to further our mission to be viewed as the expert for the home," said Steven H. Temares, chief executive officer and member of the Board of Directors of Bed Bath & Beyond Inc., in a release.

The acquisition has already resulted in an exciting next step: the summer 2017 opening of a design and photo studio in NYC that will serve One Kings Lane, Bed Bath & Beyond Inc. and its associated brands—buybuy BABY, Christmas Tree Shops andThat! and Harmon Face Values.

In November 2016, Bed Bath & Beyond acquired PersonalizationMall.com, an online retailer of personalized products based in Burr Ridge, Illinois. With PersonalizationMall.com’s extensive array of gifts and keepsakes across categories that include jewelry, office, wall art and travel, Bed Bath & Beyond will expand its product assortment in the personalization category, which continues to grow in popularity. And per Bed Bath & Beyond, the company will be able to tap into PersonalizationMall.com’s “fully integrated, proprietary technology platform that drives quality, speed and efficiency throughout the process of personalizing a breadth of products to each customer’s unique preference.”

Kroger

**Founded:** 1883

**Headquarters:** Cincinnati, Ohio

**Workforce:** Approximately 431,000 associates

**Retail Locations:** 2,796 stores in 35 states

**Quirky Tidbit:**

If you’re curious how Kroger is performing, simply look at its hiring plans. In January 2017, the company announced intent to fill an estimated 10,000 permanent positions in Kroger’s supermarket divisions. And last year, Kroger’s active workforce grew by more than 12,000 associates (9,000 of whom are veterans).

Those impressive numbers join several other 2016 highlights that expand the Kroger brand and deliver technology-enhanced capabilities that make shopping easier and more efficient. In April 2016, Kroger announced a strategic partnership with Lucky’s, a specialty grocery chain that’s focused on natural, organic and locally grown products. The partnership is expected to “significantly accelerate Lucky’s Market’s growth in new and existing markets,” according to Kroger.

Another partnership hit a milestone in 2016. After starting a Murray’s Cheese store-within-a-store concept in a few Kroger stores in 2008, Kroger announced in December that the 350th Murray’s Cheese store opened (joining nearly 100 stores that opened in 2016). The store-within-a-store is designed to replicate the experience of Murray’s flagship store in Greenwich Village, which remains a destination for cheese lovers worldwide.

Speaking of milestones, November saw the opening of Kroger’s 500th ClickList location. Launched in late 2014, ClickList is an online order/store pick-up service that gives customers a convenient way to get their groceries. ClickList is one of several technology-driven innovations developed by Kroger Technology, which was named to Computerworld’s Top 100 Best Places to Work in IT in 2016.

Kroger brand break-down:

- 2,253 pharmacies
- 787 convenience stores
- 324 fine jewelry stores
- 1,439 supermarket fuel centers
- 38 food production plants
Macy's

**Founded:** 1858, Rowland Hussey Macy, Retail  
**Headquarters:** Cincinnati, Ohio  
**Workforce:** Approximately 157,900 employees  
**Retail Locations:** 728 stores  

**Quirky Tidbit:**
Retailers are no strangers to challenges when navigating an industry that's rapidly evolving, and Macy's is no exception. After starting 2016 with an announcement of cost-efficiency measures that included consolidating existing store groups, Macy's continued the year with an unwavering focus on strategic and in-demand product partnerships, technological innovation and new methods of customer engagement.

Shoppers may associate technology with online retail purchases, but Macy's is using technology to transform the in-store experience. In July 2016, Macy's introduced a 10-location pilot of Macy's On Call, a mobile web tool that lets customers interact with an AI-powered platform using their mobile devices. The platform uses IBM Watson, via Satisfi, to help customers easily navigate a Macy's store. For example, a customer asks a natural language question such as, “Where are women's shoes?” Macy's On Call delivers a customized response, and the system will evolve as it learns more about a store's customer base.

“Since each Macy's store is different, and consumers increasingly prefer mobile platforms, Macy's On Call is providing shoppers with a helpful tool to get information fast as they shop and navigate the store,” according to Macy's.

The last year also saw several partnerships with prominent brands and individuals, all designed to further enhance Macy's product offerings. Joy Mangano, Shaun White, Nickelodeon and Carmelo Anthony, Kelly Ripa, Lady Gaga, Elton John, Ryan Seacrest and Iris Apfel all brought a variety of new merchandise to Macy's customers, giving them a coveted combination of on-trend products and celebrity appeal.

Possibly the biggest highlight of 2016? The always-anticipated Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade celebrated its 90th anniversary. Here's to the next decade of balloons, performances and merriment!

ALDI

**Founded:** 1946  
**Headquarters:** Essen, Germany  
**Retail Locations:** More than 1,600 stores in 35 states  
**Workforce:** 24,000+ employees  

**Quirky Tidbit:**
ALDI’s goal is concise: “impressively high quality at impossibly low prices.” ALDI may not be at the technological forefront of the retail industry—after all, it was only in early 2016 that ALDI began accepting credit cards at all stores nationwide. Yet the company maintains a relentless focus on its products—including existing and new brands—further solidifying the grocery store’s appeal among current and new customers alike.

The last year introduced several product-related updates and announcements. In June, for example, ALDI launched the Never Any! Line of meats, a collection of products from different brands that all include no antibiotics, no added hormones or steroids and no animal by-products (vegetarian-fed). And just two months later, ALDI launched Little Journeys, the store's first full line of baby products that include changing and feeding essentials.

Products are undoubtedly at the core of ALDI’S focus, but the company also keeps a watchful eye on opportunities to improve the customer experience. To coincide with the increased focus on health and wellness that accompanies a new year, ALDI in January “hit refresh,” according to the company. The initiative included the introduction of Healthier Checklanes, which replaced chocolate and candy with healthier snack options like single-serve trail mix, dried fruit and granola bars; and an expanded selection of fresh and organic meat and produce.

Later in the year, ALDI debuted a new store design in Richmond, which included softer lighting, a larger fresh produce section and wider aisles. That continued focus on customer experience and high-quality products hasn’t just struck a chord with customers; it’s also been noticed by various media outlets like Refinery 29, which published a post in January 2017 identifying 33 of the best products under $5 “that prove ALDI is the new Trader Joe's.”

Because of a quickly growing customer base, ALDI has aggressive growth plans. In 2016, the company opened 45 new stores just in California. ALDI plans to open 80 to 130 new stores annually, bringing the total of U.S. stores to nearly 2,000 by the end of 2018.
Home Depot

**Founded:** 1978
**Headquarters:** Atlanta, Georgia
**Retail locations:** 2,200+ stores in North America
**Workforce:** Nearly 400,000 “orange-blooded associates”

**Quirky Tidbit:**
There’s no doubt that increasingly sophisticated technology and growing customer expectations are motivating retailers to pursue a more interconnected experience for employees and customers alike—and Home Depot is no exception.

Implementing new technology requires some degree of experimentation. Yet Home Depot is also paying close attention to customer behavior to influence their strategic initiatives. On Black Friday 2015, Home Depot reports it served 941,000 mobile web page views in a single hour—a new company record. That compelling statistic continues to fuel enhancements to Home Depot’s mobile strategy, including the introduction of a redesigned mobile app in 2016. It’s now even easier for customers to fulfill orders in-store or at home, critical functionality given that more than 40 percent of Home Depot’s online orders are picked up in-store (a number that will likely increase over the coming years).

“It’s all about giving the consumer more control,” says Matt Jones, general manager of mobile, in a release.

Changing technology also continues to influence Home Depot’s products. The company introduced expanded Smart Home offerings in 2016 in three areas of emphasis: security and protection, energy conservation and savings, and relaxation and enjoyment.

Home Depot’s approach to innovation isn’t only contained in its products and services. The company makes a point to recognize external innovation with annual Innovation Awards. In 2016, honorees included Pergo Outlast+, which makes laminate flooring that offers 24 hours of defense against liquid spills. Runners-up included Milwaukee Tools and Heath Zenith.

And because excelling at innovation includes staying ahead of the curve, Home Depot maintains a focus on identifying—and filling—possible gaps.

“Our leadership team did a ‘war games’ exercise recently with teams pretending to be different companies and technologies,” Home Depot CEO Craig Menear said during a panel discussion at Georgia Tech’s Scheller College of Business. “We aggressively designed strategies to go after our own business, and the results were eye-opening and caused us to make some essential changes and investments. It really lit a fire under our value of creating an entrepreneurial spirit throughout our company.”

Apple/iTunes

**Founded:** Incorporated 1977
**Headquarters:** Cupertino, California
**Workforce:** 110,000 fulltime
**Retail Locations:** 400+ stores
(5.3 million square feet related to retail store space)

**Quirky Tidbit:**
There’s no denying that Apple is synonymous with all things technology, not to mention innovation. And although Apple’s focus is largely digital, the company continues to embrace its retail stores as a place not just to buy, but also to explore, learn and connect (no pun intended!)

The last year proved to be a significant one for Apple stores. In May, the company began rolling out a redesigned store layout, which debuted in the company’s flagship store in San Francisco. The new store design is anchored by a town square, complete with a tree-filled grand hall and Genius Grove dotted with window displays that highlight music, photography and more. Other store features include the Board Room, where local technology experts can help entrepreneurs and small businesses; and merchandise like phone cases that are displayed without packaging.

One of the driving forces behind the retail redesign is to help customers rethink the Apple store. Angela Ahrendts, Apple’s senior vice president of retail, explained this mindset change to Vanity Fair. “This is not just a store. We want people to say ‘Hey, meet me at Apple.’”

As the redesigned store layout continues to roll out to Apple retail locations, the last year also saw several store opening milestones. In late July, Apple opened its first store in Brooklyn, Apple Williamsburg. September saw the opening of the company’s first Apple Store in Mexico, while in mid-October, the company’s first store in Europe—Apple Regent Street in London—reopened with the new layout. And in December, Apple opened Apple Marché Saint-Germain, the company’s third store in Paris and its first on the Left Bank.

Amid the retail excitement, Apple continued to make headlines in other categories. In late July, Apple CEO Tim Cook announced that the company had recently sold the billionth iPhone. And in mid-December, Apple AirPods hit the market, enabling a wireless listening experience that just might have a game-changing effect on audio-focused gadgets.
Quirky Tidbit:
The last year proved to be an ideal example of the duality facing Barnes & Noble (and other book retailers). To fulfill ongoing demand for e-Readers, Barnes & Noble released the Samsung Galaxy Tab A NOOK, a next-generation reader’s tablet complete with a camera, GPS, FM tuner and an enhanced digital bookstore experience. Yet in a sign that print books are still in-demand, 2016 saw a record number of Barnes & Noble pre-orders for Harry Potter and the Cursed Child—the most pre-orders since Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows was published in 2007.

Those two events showcase the balance that Barnes & Noble leadership keep top-of-mind: investing in devices for technologically-inclined readers, while also maintaining a focus on the physical books and magazines that remain at the core of the company's business. Barnes & Noble sells approximately 190 million books per year and is the second largest magazine retailer in the U.S.

Yet there’s no denying that reading habits continue to evolve, which is why Barnes & Noble maintains a focus on expanding its product line and diversifying the brand. In May, Barnes & Noble announced the first-ever national teen book festival—B-Fest—held at all Barnes & Noble stores from June 10-12. The festival is, to date, the largest-ever weekend of author events in the company’s history.

Last year, Barnes & Noble also announced plans to test an expanded café with food and wine at four concept stores, which will open in fiscal 2017. The goal of the increased food and beverage selections is two-fold: drive traffic to the store and entice customers to stay in-store longer.

What’s interesting about Barnes & Noble is their audience segments. In addition to its online and brick-and-mortar customers, Barnes & Noble also continues to provide tools and services to authors. In June, Barnes & Noble launched NOOK Press Print, a self-service program that NOOK Press authors can use to create hardcover or paperback books for consumer purchase. Additionally, eligible authors can sell their books at Barnes & Noble stores, whether locally, regionally or nationally.

We’d call 2016 a successful chapter for Barnes & Noble. The story continues this year!

Quirky Tidbit:
One of the hardest things about visualizing a home improvement or redecorating project can be visualizing the results. Lowe's is tapping into augmented reality (AR) technology to solve that pervasive customer challenge in an innovative way. In November, Lowe’s launched Lowe’s Vision, which uses Tango (Google technology that uses computer vision to enable AR experiences on compatible smartphones).

Using the Lowe’s Vision app and the Lenovo Phab 2 Pro, customers can easily visualize virtual furnishings, fixtures and/or accents in their actual living rooms, kitchens or bathrooms.

“Lowe’s Vision and Tango bring our customers one step closer toward eliminating the challenge of visualizing a completed home improvement project,” said Kyle Nel, executive director of Lowe’s Innovation Labs, in a release.

Lowe’s Vision is an ideal example of the transformative power of technology, especially in the retail industry. Using a flashy new device or technology will only get a company so far. Instead, it’s much more important to ensure that the technology solves a customer problem or makes a process like an order or transaction easier and more convenient.

Consider another compelling example - in August, Lowe's announced a pilot of LoweBot, a NAVi autonomous retail service robot by Fellow Robots. In the fall, LoweBot was tested in 11 stores throughout the San Francisco Bay area after nearly two years of extensively studying robots and how they can help customers more efficiently navigate the store and find what they need. Although the robots are focused on helping customers and freeing employees to focus more on personalized service and project expertise, they also offer operational benefits like improved inventory management.

“We designed the NAVi robot to make the shopping experience easier for consumers—simplifying the process of finding the product you’re looking for—while also managing the back-end and keeping shelf inventory up-to-date for the retailer,” said Marco Mascorro, CEO, Fellow Robots, in a release.

Keep your eyes peeled. Maybe you’ll see a LoweBot in a Lowe’s aisle near you!
L.L.Bean

**Founded:** 1912, Private Retail

**Headquarters:** Freeport, Maine

**Workforce:** 5,000 employees

**Retail Locations:** 28 stores, 10 outlets

**Quirky Tidbit:**

It’s no surprise to see retailers heavily invest in and focus on product quality, especially a brand like L.L.Bean that’s more than a century old and known for outdoor clothing and accessories that are built to last. In 2016, L.L.Bean’s dedication to one product in particular was showcased in a *Boston Globe* story and video about rigorous backpack testing that happens in the L.L.Bean product testing lab.

A bit of background: the backpack market is crowded. As Megan Woolhouse wrote for the Globe, 2016 backpack sales were expected to hit $3.1 billion—up from $1.9 billion only five years ago. That’s because backpacks aren’t just for students—they’re also increasingly popular with adults.

L.L.Bean has long been a go-to source for backpacks, especially those who covet the company’s performance-minded, utilitarian styles. That’s largely because of each backpack’s quality, which is rigorously tested in the company’s product testing lab. Zippers, for example, are opened and closed 20,000 times over eight hours, Woolhouse writes. A machine applies more than 280 lbs. of pulling force on shoulder straps. And lab technicians keep a close watch on how long polyester can stand up to sandpaper.

This sort of testing might seem a bit extreme, but it’s paying off. Sales of L.L.Bean’s deluxe book pack have increased 10 percent per year since 2011, a statistic that’s especially impressive given the incredible amount of competition.

New store openings—another indicator of company success—brought L.L.Bean to new markets in 2016, including the company’s first stores in Rhode Island and Michigan. In spring 2017, the company plans to open its first Wisconsin store, as well as its fifth store in New York.

Another 2016 highlight speaks to L.L.Bean’s unwavering commitment to customer service. A December *Business Insider* video declared that L.L.Bean has “the best return policy of any retailer.” When reviewing the last year, one thing’s certain: L.L.Bean doesn’t cut corners when it comes to product quality or customer satisfaction, and people are paying attention.

Walgreens

**Founded:** 1901, Charles Rudolph Walgreen

**Headquarters:** Deerfield, Illinois

**Retail Locations:** 8,175 drugstores

**Workforce:** Approximately 247,000 employees

**Quirky Tidbit:**

When you think of Walgreens, you likely think of a pharmacy: a place to buy medications (among other products). But what you may not realize is the retailer isn’t just focused on helping customers—it’s also taking a prominent role in helping to evolve healthcare and fight drug abuse.

The last year saw significant initiatives in both categories. In February 2016, Walgreens launched a new comprehensive effort to combat drug abuse with two programs: the installation of safe medication disposal kiosks and making naloxone—a lifesaving opioid antidote—available without a prescription. Both programs were gradually rolled out, with safe medication disposal kiosks hitting an October milestone with installation in 500 U.S. pharmacies. Naloxone availability was implemented on a state-by-state basis. And in states that require a prescription, Walgreens announced their commitment to working with regulators to help update rules so that naloxone could be dispensed without a prescription.

“We understand the challenges our communities face, and we stand ready to help our patients and customers lead healthier lives,” said Richard Ashworth, Walgreens president of pharmacy and retail operations, in a release. “When the stakes are this high, the solutions must be comprehensive.”

Walgreens concluded 2016 with the announcement of a strategic relationship with MATTER, a Chicago-based healthcare incubator and innovation community that supports continued focus “on new ways to help support the development of next-generation healthcare technology, products and services,” according to Walgreens. Walgreens will offer expertise to MATTER’s curriculum, participate in mentorships and support initiatives that, according to Walgreens, “give MATTER’s start-ups resources to grow their businesses and connect to the larger regional healthcare ecosystem.”
JC Penney

Founded: 1902
Headquarters: Plano, Texas
Workforce: 100,000+ associates
Retail Locations: 1,000+ stores in U.S. and Puerto Rico

Quirky Tidbit:
They say the customer is always right. And its customer input played a key role in JC Penney’s decision to make a return to the appliance category. In January 2016, JC Penney introduced major appliances in a 22-store pilot project that began Feb. 1. The company cited customer data that “showed that the vast majority of its shoppers own a home and are frequently searching for major appliance options on JCP.com,” according to JC Penney. The company also conducted what it called “extensive third-party consumer research,” in which respondents said “appliances would be a natural extension of JC Penney’s home business.”

The pilot project launched with more than 90 appliance models in kitchen and laundry. One of several strategic initiatives to improve sales in JC Penney’s home department, the major appliances pilot proved successful, prompting a May announcement of an appliance showroom expansion to nearly 500 stores and online. Additionally, JC Penney allocated 25 percent more floor space to window coverings, a decision that enables the company to better pursue “its former leadership position in window coverings,” according to JC Penney.

While 2016 saw a strong focus on renewing or enhancing previously successful product lines, JC Penney also welcomed new brands, including Boutique+, JC Penney’s first fashion brand for plus-size women. The retailer collaborated with Ashley Nell Tipton, Project Runway winner, to also offer apparel under the Ashley Nell Tipton for Boutique+ brand. With the new clothing line, JC Penney also introduced The Boutique, a new in-store concept that serves as a one-stop shopping destination for full-figured customers, complete with classic and modern clothing and accessory brands.

Last year, JC Penney also recognized a milestone: 10 years of Sephora inside JC Penney. In April, the company announced 60 new Sephora inside JC Penney locations, now making the beauty retailer a prominent attraction in more than half of JC Penney stores.

Ace Hardware

Founded: 1924, independent retailer owned cooperative
Headquarters: Oak Brook, Illinois
Workforce: Approximately 86,000 employees
Retail Locations: 4,700 stores, 4,600 of which are independently owned and operated

Quirky Tidbit:
Since its founding in 1924 by a small group of Chicago hardware store owners, Ace Hardware has maintained an unwavering commitment on giving small stores as much of a chance to succeed as their larger counterparts. That’s why the company’s collaboration with The Grommet—announced in November 2016—makes such perfect sense.

The Grommet is, according to Ace Hardware, “a leading product launch platform for innovative consumer products.” You likely know some of the brands successfully brought to market by The Grommet, including FitBit, Mrs. Meyer’s Clean Day and SodaStream.

To kick off the collaboration, 20 unique products from The Grommet (sourced from 15 local makers) debuted in more than 160 Ace Hardware stores. Products included a digital tape measure from eTape16, a keyring USB and mobile phone charger from Nomad; and Peeps, an eyeglass cleaner that uses NASA technology.

In the initial partnership announcement, Ace said the product assortment will be updated seasonally.

“For 92 years, Ace has stood for local small business; for the underdog who duked it out against the Goliaths of corporate America,” said John Venhuizen, president and CEO, Ace Hardware Corporation, in a release. “So the partnership with The Grommet not only aligns with the passions of our local owners, but fuels our desire to further Ace as the place for dreamers, inventors, innovators and makers.”

To further support that pledge, Ace also seized an opportunity to let local makers know they could just find their products on Ace Hardware shelves. As part of The Grommet partnership announcement, Venhuizen also encouraged makers to “send information about your most innovative products to us at Ace, and we’ll be ready to review your creations to see if we can champion your product to bring to consumers through Ace store.”

Ace, the helpful place. Indeed.
Dollar Tree

**Founded:** 1953  
**Headquarters:** Chesapeake, Virginia  
**Workforce:** 167,800 employees  
**Retail Locations:** 14,284 stores (under the Dollar Tree and Family Dollar names)

**Quirky Tidbit:**
After a wildly successful 2015 marked by Dollar Tree’s acquisition of Family Dollar, Dollar Tree headed into 2016 as the largest discount/dollar store operator in North America, according to the company. And that growth had a noticeable impact on the company’s numbers. In a release detailing Dollar Tree, Inc.’s results for first quarter fiscal 2016, the company reported a 133.6 percent increase in consolidated net sales, to $5.09 billion from $2.18 billion. Additionally, gross profit increased 107.6 percent.

Amid the good news, 2016 wasn’t without challenges for Dollar Tree. As a result of the acquisition, the company faces increased competition not just from other discount/dollar stores, but also convenience stores and the front-end areas of drug stores, wrote Marilyn Much in an article for *Investor’s Business Daily.*

Yet they’re on track for continued success, thanks to factors like accelerating store traffic and various improvements, including the strengthening of Family Dollar end-of-aisle displays, Much wrote.

In October 2016, Dollar Tree received what was likely an unexpected brand awareness boost. Prominent beauty blogger Raye Boyce posted a YouTube video for the Dollar Tree Makeup Challenge, an impromptu beauty vlogging campaign that started in 2015. Thanks to Boyce’s popularity, the Dollar Tree Makeup Challenge—and, by extension, Dollar Tree’s cosmetics offerings—got a big boost, racking up more than 300,000 video views in a day. As of late January, the video had reached 724,639 views.

Trader Joe’s

**Founded:** 1958, by Joe Coulombe  
**Headquarters:** Monrovia, California  
**Workforce:** 35,000 crew members  
**Retail Locations:** 460 stores

**Quirky Tidbit:**
If you shop at Trader Joe’s, there’s a good chance you have at least one Trader Joe’s product at the top of your favorites list. Thanks to a simple equation—great food + great prices = value—the company continues to cultivate an incredibly loyal fan base. In fact, anecdotes of particularly passionate customer reactions were part of remarks made by Doug Rauch, Trader Joe’s president, during the Retail Solutions Providers Association’s RetailNOW 2016 event. In case you’re curious, the two products he highlighted were Chocolate-Covered Caramel Popcorn and Ginger Granola.

What’s impressive about Trader Joe’s products is that they don’t just attract loyal customers—they also earn a sizable amount of media attention, too, which continues to help boost brand recognition. Last year, PopSugar Food created an extensive slideshow and story of their favorite Trader Joe’s products of 2016, including Fair Trader Malawi Coffee, Sweet Plantain Chips, Hatch Chile Macaroni & Cheese and Kung Pao Tempura Cauliflower.

Later in the year, renowned food and cooking magazine Bon Appetit compiled a list of the 14 most popular Trader Joe’s products of 2016, led by Mandarin Orange Chicken.

Products are undeniably at the core of Trader Joe’s company focus. That not only includes expanding existing product lines and introducing new ones, but also improving product quality where applicable. Last year, Trader Joe’s set a key goal: ensure all eggs sold nationally come from cage-free suppliers by 2025 (an initiative that started in 2005 with Trader Joe’s-brand eggs coming solely from cage-free hens).

It’s likely not surprising that, with all the focus on Trader Joe’s products (and, by extension, customer loyalty), the company continues to add new stores throughout the U.S. Last year, Trader Joe’s opened 17 new locations, and additional store openings are in the pipeline for 2017. One thing, Trader Joe’s? Make sure you never run out of Speculoos Cookie Butter!
**Nordstrom**

**Founded:** 1901, by John W. Nordstrom  
**Headquarters:** Seattle, Washington  
**Workforce:** 72,500 employees  
**Retail Locations:** 347 stores in the U.S. and Canada

**Quirky Tidbit:**

One of the fascinating things about retail technology is that the devices, applications and innovations aren’t just confined to the digital world. Often, technology is also used as a bridge to a brick-and-mortar store, improving the in-store experience (or introducing new in-store capabilities) in a way that helps drive increased customer traffic. That reasoning served as the impetus for three new mobile features that Nordstrom launched in 2016.

The first, Store Mode, enables customers to pick their favorite store location in the Nordstrom mobile app, then toggle between all Nordstrom inventory and in-store inventory for the previously identified location. The second feature, Visual Search, enables customers to take a photo of an item and match it to available Nordstrom inventory. And in October, Nordstrom launched a pilot of Reserve & Try in several Seattle-area stores. Nordstrom app users can select a piece of merchandise on their smartphones and have it placed in an in-store dressing room. Reserve & Try is expected to roll out nationally in 2017.

Of course, a mobile retail experience relies on products, and in 2016, Nordstrom continued to bring coveted brands to its customer base. In April, Nordstrom saw the launch of IVY PARK, a women’s activewear line co-founded by Beyonce and Sir Philip Green that “unifies fashion and performance,” according to Nordstrom.

In mid-summer, the company announced the expansion of the Nordstrom/Madewell partnership to 20 stores in the fall. This marked the partnership’s third distribution expansion since its launch in March 2015. Nordstrom is the only brick-and-mortar retailer to sell Madewell merchandise, aside from Madewell stores.

Retail partnerships continue to be a key part of Nordstrom’s larger strategy. Several highly-anticipated brands—including SJP Collection, Topshop/Topman and Olivia Palermo + Chelsea28—have selected Nordstrom as their launch retail partner of choice, giving Nordstrom customers a chance to own on-trend fashion and accessories that aren’t widely available elsewhere.

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**Dollar General**

**Founded:** 1939  
**Headquarters:** Goodlettsville, Tennessee  
**Workforce:** 119,000+ employees  
**Retail Locations:** 13,000 stores in 43 states

**Quirky Tidbit:**

Curious as to how things are going at Dollar General? Keep these two highlights in mind. In August, the company celebrated the opening of its 13,000th store (in Birmingham, Ala.), a festive event complete with gift card giveaways, the No. 20 Dollar General Toyota Camry NASCAR showcar and a $13,000 donation to two area organizations from the Dollar General Literacy Foundation—and part of aggressive growth that included the opening of approximately 900 new stores in fiscal 2016. And throughout fiscal 2017, Dollar General will continue to pursue ambitious real estate plans that include the opening of approximately 1,000 new stores and the relocation or remodeling of approximately 900 stores.

Opening new stores not only gives Dollar General a chance to grow its customer base—that also means increased job opportunities. To help support Dollar General’s expansion plans, the company announced in September that it would add 10,000 employees in full- and part-time positions.

The company also marked an impressive milestone in early 2016. The prior year marked Dollar General’s 26th straight year of same-store sales increases, according to a fiscal year report cited in a *Fortune magazine* article. Additionally, annual financial statistics compiled by Marketwatch show a steady sales/revenue growth over the last five years, culminating in sales/revenue of $20.37 billion in 2016.

So, in a nutshell? Things at Dollar General are going well. With a continued eye on new or refreshed stores, the company last year bought 41 former Walmart Express stores. Existing Dollar General stores were relocated into the new spaces, which, at the same time, were updated with the company’s new DG16 layout, which includes more sales square footage, expanded offerings that include fresh meat and produce, and at 37 of the locations, fueling stations. The DG16 layout is designed to be more customer-friendly, while also helping to facilitate faster checkouts.
BJ's Wholesale Club

**Founded:** 1984  
**Headquarters:** Westborough, Massachusetts  
**Workforce:** 25,000+ team members  
**Retail Locations:** 210+ clubs in 15 states  

**Quirky Tidbit:**

The last year saw a range of highlights for BJ's Wholesale Club, a membership warehouse club that operates throughout the East Coast. As more customers want an option to order online and pick up in-store, BJ’s launched a Pick Up and Pay service to unite online shopping and in-store pick-ups. The initiative was supported by a National Retail Federation survey that found 66 percent of online shoppers want the option to pick up in-store. BJ’s Wholesale Club isn’t alone in including a focus on philanthropy and community service as part of its company culture, but 2016 saw an impressive milestone for the company. In October, BJ’s announced that it surpassed 50 million pounds of donated food as part of the BJ’s Feeding Communities Program, which has helped 45 food banks.

And in December, the company announced another technologically enabled initiative: online ordering for the stores’ deli and bakery departments. Customers can place orders for top-quality party platters and customizable cakes for in-club pick-up in as little as 36 hours. The company picked an ideal time to launch the online ordering, given the hectic pace and demands of holiday entertaining.

Speaking of holidays, the company opted to close on Thanksgiving for the 10th year in a row, a decision that highlights BJ’s Wholesale Club’s commitment to its employees. The company also generated widespread buzz with a Thanksgiving-themed sales promotion. BJ’s locations offered 10- to 14-pound Butterball turkeys for 89 cents/pound. And in conjunction with the promotion, BJ’s also offered a free 90-day membership trial, which means prospective and new members alike had a chance to enjoy significant savings during what can typically be a pricey shopping trip.

Publix

**Founded:** 1930, George W. Jenkins, Jr  
**Headquarters:** Lakeland, Florida  
**Workforce:** 189,500+ employees  
**Retail Locations:** 1,138 stores in 6 states  

**Quirky Tidbit:**

For the largest employee-owned grocery chain in the U.S., 2016 proved to be a year of experimentation—and a successful one at that. General customer demand for online ordering and in-store pick-up continues to increase, but Publix opted to take their related initiative to the next level.

In July, the company announced a pilot service with Instacart, an eCommerce and delivery service that enables online ordering and home delivery. The pilot launched in select Miami locations, then later expanded into other markets, including Tampa. Publix also tested in-store Starbucks kiosks in stores throughout Tampa and Orlando, part of an ongoing focus on enhancing the customer experience with the products and services they want amid an increasingly competitive grocery marketplace.

Speaking of customer experience, Publix introduced a new way to keep customers informed, engaged and entertained. The Publix Checkout, the company’s customer experience blog, launched in August. With content in topics like recipes, community initiatives, holiday entertaining and health and wellness, The Publix Checkout is a go-to resource for ideas and resources, not unlike Publix stores themselves.

“Having a blog provides us a fresh and inspiring way to connect socially with customers, taking them beyond the aisles and showing them we’re more than just a grocery store,” said Maria Brous, Publix media and community relations director, in a release.

Last summer, Publix also announced an intent to expand further into Virginia with the purchase of 10 stores from Ahold USA Inc.’s affiliate, GIANT/MARTIN’S. Publix CEO and President Todd Jones said the purchase “aligns with Publix’s aggressive growth plan for the commonwealth of Virginia.”
If 2015 was a defining moment for mobile use in retail, then 2016 showed the industry what is possible as merchants continued to fine-tune their app experiences for consumers.

And they will continue along that path well into 2017 and beyond.

One of the bigger trends to emerge in 2016 was payments becoming a larger focus for retailers as they attempt to keep customers within their apps for the entire shopping experience.

CVS, Kohl’s and Wal-Mart all added QR code-based payments to their respective mobile apps in 2016. Target now reportedly will do the same.

Name-brand retailers realize what is at stake when turning their mobile apps into a one-stop shop for customers. This approach keeps consumers connected to the retailer throughout the shopping experience.

So, why not add a payments option to the app and complete the loop?

“GfK’s FutureBuy research in the U.S. shows that 1 out of 3 shoppers, 37 percent, use their smartphones to shop in-store; but when it comes to paying in a brick-and-mortar setting, consumers use mobile payments for only 2.2 percent of transactions, representing a massive opportunity gap,” Tim Spenny, vice president of financial services consulting at GfK Research, wrote in a 2016 blog post for Retail Customer Experience sister publication Mobile Payments Today.

The Merchant Customer Exchange (MCX) once existed to fill that gap.

When MCX shelved its CurrentC mobile payment system in 2016 after multiple false starts, some of the biggest names in that consortium were left without a clear mobile wallet strategy. But retailers such as CVS, Dunkin’ Donuts, Subway and Wal-Mart all moved forward with mobile-payment plans.
Target is about to do the same, and don’t be surprised when more retailers take this approach in 2017.

Another trend retailers should watch in 2017 is how consumers use their smartphones in retail situations.

Retail Customer Experience surveyed consumers and found some 49 percent of respondents used a smartphone to conduct a product search in a retail situation. Thirty-nine percent of consumers use a mobile device as a price-comparison tool.

The biggest surprise from the survey: 31 percent of respondents do not use a mobile device in a retail environment.

That figure should concern retailers for a couple of reasons.

First, if consumers are not using smartphones in a retail situation, then they might be unaware of a retailer’s mobile app. And if they’re unaware of the mobile app, they’re probably missing out on coupons and discounts that could drive more overall spend during each visit.

Second, the retailer is missing out on extended face time with customers. One of the more significant trends in the banking industry is an attempt by financial institutions to keep their customers within the “four walls” of the bank through digital channels. Retailers also should use this approach and give consumers a reason to do so with features that keep them engaged throughout a store visit.

Finally, if retailers doubt the power of mobile with today’s consumers, let’s examine some of the holiday shopping numbers from 2016.

Between Nov. 1 and Dec. 31, some 50 percent of holiday website visits came from mobile devices, including smartphones and tablets.

PayPal said that in the five days from Thanksgiving to Cyber Monday it processed more than $2 billion in mobile payments, accounting for one-third of total payment volume for the period.

“Mobile is going to drive the future of payments,” PayPal CEO Dan Schulman said. “You’re going to see a lot more volume driven by retailers rethinking their approach … and using mobile to compete with the likes of Amazon.”

You probably won’t find a better endorsement for mobile in 2017.
7-Eleven
Founded: 1927
Headquarters: Dallas, Texas
Workforce: Not listed
Retail Locations: 61,000
Summary: The world’s largest convenience retail chain operates, franchises or licenses more than 61,000 stores in 18 countries, with 10,900 of those in North America. Currently, 90 percent of 7-Eleven stores in the U.S. are franchised. Known for its Slurpee, Big Bite and Big Gulp brands, 7-Eleven has expanded into salads, side dishes, cut fruit and protein boxes, as well as pizza, chicken wings, cheeseburgers and hot chicken sandwiches. Customers also use 7-Eleven for payment services, self-service lockers and other convenience services. The chain has developed an online application for prospective franchisees, and franchise candidates can be approved and trained to operate their stores in three to six months.

Academy Sports + Outdoors
Founded: 1938
Headquarters: Katy, Texas
Workforce: 25,000+
Retail Locations: 225
Summary: Academy Sports + Outdoors operates more than 225 stores in 16 states with over 25,000 employees throughout the U.S. South, Southeast and Midwest. It is currently owned by Kohlberg Kravis Roberts & Co LP, together with its affiliates, “KKR”, a global investment firm, and led by CEO and President J.K. Symancyk. Prior to August 2011, the company was owned by the Gochman Family and led by Chairman and CEO David Gochman. Sales reached $1 billion in 2004, $2 billion in 2007 and $3 billion dollars in 2012. Today, annual sales exceed $4.6 billion. In November 2016, the outdoor retailer opened its first Illinois location.

Advance Auto Parts
Founded: 1932
Headquarters: Roanoke, Virginia
Workforce: 74,000
Retail Locations: 5,372
Summary: Advance Auto Parts, a leading automotive aftermarket parts provider in North America, serves both professional installer and do-it-yourself customers. Advance operates more than 5,200 stores and 127 Worldpac branches, and serves approximately 1,300 independently owned Carquest branded stores in the U.S., Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and Canada. MOTOSHOP Technology Tools, a product portfolio from Advance Auto Parts, recently introduced a series of enhancements to the tools and programs available for commercial shop owners, service managers and technicians to help shops increase efficiencies in repair and service offerings and better connect with customers.

Army Air Force Exchange
Founded: 1895
Headquarters: Dallas, Texas
Workforce: 43,000
Retail Locations: 3,100+
Summary: The Army Air Force Exchange provides retail services and merchandise for Army and Air Force personnel in 33 countries, five U.S. territories and 50 states. It operates 181 main stores and more than 1,000 restaurants, including Taco Bell, Burger King, Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen, Subway, Boston Market, Starbucks, and Cinnabon. The Exchange is a major source of employment for members of the Army and Air Force. Approximately 31 percent of the 43,000 Exchange associates are military service members. The Exchange is part of the Department of Defense and is directed by a board of directors responsible to the Secretaries of the Army and Air Force through the Chiefs of Staff.

AT&T Wireless
Founded: 1885 (as American Telephone & Telegraph)/1983 as current company
Headquarters: Dallas, Texas
Workforce: 240,000+
Retail Locations: 16,000
Summary: AT&T Wireless has more than 2,200 company-owned retail stores and additional distribution through alliances with retailers such as Best Buy, Walmart, Costco and RadioShack. AT&T has more than 16,000 retail locations in the U.S., including company-owned stores and kiosks, authorized dealers and third-party retail locations. The stores offer shoppers a chance to interact with fully functioning wireless handsets and services. Last year AT&T launched its Online Experience Stores, at which customers can experience and purchase AT&T products and services via a digital storefront that features a 3-D shopping model, interactive demonstrations and tutorials in five categories of wireless products from wireless devices to messaging. The majority of AT&T’s more than 240,000 employees are U.S.-based, and it has employees in more than 60 countries.
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<th>Founded</th>
<th>Headquarters</th>
<th>Workforce</th>
<th>Retail Locations</th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AutoZone</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Memphis, Tennessee</td>
<td>70,000+</td>
<td>5,835</td>
<td>AutoZone is a leading retailer and distributor of automotive replacement parts and accessories. It has stores in the U.S., Puerto Rico, Mexico and Brazil. Each store carries a product line for cars, sport utility vehicles, vans and light trucks, including new and remanufactured hard parts, maintenance items and accessories. Many stores also have a commercial sales program that provides commercial credit and delivery of parts and other products to local, regional and national repair garages, dealers, service stations, and public sector accounts. AutoZone does not derive revenue from automotive repair or installation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bass Pro Shops</td>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Springfield, Missouri</td>
<td>10,000+</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Bass Pro Shops is known for its large, wilderness-themed stores and wide array of hunting, fishing and outdoor gear. The chain’s stores have unique features such as aquariums, wildlife displays, archery ranges, bowling alleys, restaurants and more. Today Bass Pro locations are the number-one tourist destination in three states, including its flagship “granddaddy” store in Springfield, Missouri that receives more than 4 million visitors annually. Its private label sporting goods are also distributed to other sporting goods stores through its American Rod &amp; Gun wholesale operation. Additionally, the company owns Tracker Marine, a leading brand of fishing boats. It sells a variety of boats for fishing and cruising. Bass Pro recently acquired Ranger Boats, Triton and Stratos boat brands. The company’s hospitality division operates Big Cedar Lodge, a wilderness resort located on 850 acres in Missouri’s Ozarks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Lots</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Columbus, Ohio</td>
<td>35,000</td>
<td>1,449</td>
<td>Big Lots offers an assortment of brand-name items and products, including food, furniture, seasonal items, electronics and accessories, home décor, toys, and gifts. The retailer has 1,449 stores in 47 states and the District of Columbia. Big Lots offers merchandise priced 20 to 40 percent below most discount retailers and up to 70 percent below traditional retailers. Big Lots’ distribution system is designed to get deals into shopping carts faster. Its five major distribution centers have nearly 9 million square feet of space and use highly automated systems to receive, prepare, load, and ship merchandise. Additionally, it uses common dedicated carriers and various third-party carriers to provide service to its stores, moving merchandise through the distribution system in a timely fashion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burlington Coat Factory</td>
<td>1924</td>
<td>Burlington, New Jersey</td>
<td>35,000</td>
<td>590</td>
<td>Burlington Coat Factory is a national retail chain that offers current designer merchandise at prices up to 65 percent off other retailers’ prices. Stores feature coats, apparel, shoes and accessories for the family, plus baby clothing, furniture, travel gear, toys, home decor items, and gifts. The retailer operates 590 stores in 45 states and Puerto Rico. In October 2013, the retailer began trading on the New York Stock Exchange under the ticker symbol “BURL.” Since then, it has opened more than 100 new stores and established a buying office in Southern California, significantly growing its supply chain operations. It also constructed a new corporate headquarters, remodeled a number of its distribution centers and corporate buildings, and expanded its e-commerce operations. In 2015, it exceeded $5 billion in revenue for the first time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belk</td>
<td>1888</td>
<td>Charlotte, North Carolina</td>
<td>Not listed</td>
<td>300+</td>
<td>Belk is a private department store company with more than 300 stores in 16 Southern states and a growing digital presence. It is a portfolio company of Sycamore Partners, a private equity firm based in New York. Belk and belk.com offer an assortment of national brands and private label fashion apparel, shoes and accessories for families, along with cosmetics, a wedding registry and a selection of merchandise for the home. Each year, the company contributes 2.5 percent of pre-tax profits to support charitable efforts in three major focus areas: education, breast cancer awareness and research, and community strengthening. Belk is currently investing millions in store renovations and technology enhancements to better serve its customers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cabela’s
Founded: 1961
Headquarters: Sidney, Nebraska
Workforce: 19,700
Retail Locations: 82
Summary: Cabela’s product offering includes hunting, fishing, marine and camping merchandise, casual and outdoor apparel and footwear, optics, vehicle accessories, gifts and home furnishings with an outdoor theme. Its direct business uses catalogs and the internet to generate customer orders via mail, telephone and online.

It opened its first destination retail store in 1987 and currently operates destination retail stores that range in size from 35,000 square feet to 247,000 square feet, including the large-format destination retail stores, which are 150,000 square feet or larger. Destination retail stores feature wildlife displays and large aquariums.

Cole Haan
Founded: 1928
Workforce: Not listed
Retail Locations: 255
Summary: Cole Haan offers men’s and women’s footwear, handbags, small leather goods, belts, hosiery, gloves, scarves, hats, outerwear, and sunglasses. Cole Haan has 109 retail stores in the U.S., in addition to stores in Canada, the Middle East, and Asia. The company’s products and materials are made in the U.S., Italy, Brazil, Vietnam, China and India. In 2013, Cole Haan returned to its roots as an independently owned company after being owned by Nike, and is growing rapidly in the U.S. and abroad.

Cool Stuff Inc.
Founded: 2002
Headquarters: Orlando, Florida
Workforce: Not listed
Retail Locations: 5
Summary: Cool Stuff Inc. is an online retailer of board games, multi-player card games, collector card sets and supplies, role-playing games, toys, and miniatures. The company also has five retail locations in Florida under the name Cool Stuff Games. The stores feature daily events, weekly tournaments, special monthly events, and demos. The retailer’s online inventory is also available via its in-store computers, and can be delivered to a customer’s location the next day. Stores are stocked with drinks and snacks, and there is space available for room for games and groups of players.

CVS Caremark
Founded: 1993
Headquarters: Woonsocket, Rhode Island
Workforce: 243,000+
Retail Locations: 9,600+
Summary: CVS Caremark is the prescription benefit management subsidiary of CVS Health, which was founded in 1963. The company has more than 9,600 retail pharmacies and over 1,100 walk-in medical clinics. Coverage for outpatient drugs is provided through Assurant Health’s Prescription Drug Card Program, administered through CVS Caremark. The company has more than 80 million plan members. In January 2017, CVS Health announced that a low-cost epinephrine auto-injector option, the authorized generic for Adrenaclick manufactured by Impax Laboratories, is available at all CVS Pharmacy locations at a cash price of $109.99 for a two-pack. This compares to a cash price of $649.99 for EpiPen and $339.99 for the authorized generic for EpiPen. The price of $109.99 for the authorized generic of Adrenaclick two-pack applies to both insured and cash-paying patients without insurance.

Dick’s Sporting Goods
Founded: 1948
Headquarters: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Workforce: 37,600
Retail Locations: 676
Summary: Dick’s Sporting Goods is an omni-channel sporting goods retailer offering a broad assortment of brand name sporting goods equipment, apparel, footwear and accessories in a specialty store environment. It has stores in 47 states. The company also owns and operates Golf Galaxy LLC, a golf specialty retailer, and websites and catalog operations for both Dick’s Sporting Goods and Golf Galaxy. Additionally, Dick’s owns and operates Field & Stream, True Runner and Chelsea Collective specialty stores. In November 2016, Dick’s announced the acquisition of GameChanger Media as a new part of its Dick’s Team Sports HQ suite of digital youth sports offerings. GameChanger is a live scoring app that delivers data-driven coaching insights, live play-by-play updates and instant game recap stories for 165,000 amateur baseball and softball teams.

Dillard’s
Founded: 1938
Headquarters: Little Rock, Arkansas
Workforce: 21,600
Retail Locations: 300
Summary: Dillard’s operates approximately 300 stores, including
Discogs.com
**Founded:** 2000
**Headquarters:** Portland, Oregon
**Workforce:** 46
**Retail Locations:** Online only
**Summary:** The mission of Discogs.com is to build the largest and most comprehensive music database and marketplace. The site offers discographies of cross-referenced labels and artists of a variety of music genres and an international marketplace built off of that database. More than 327,000 people have contributed to build a catalog of more than 8 million recordings and 4.8 million artists. Discogs.com also offers the ability to catalog an individual’s music collection and list of desired recordings. Users may share their ratings and reviews. The Discogs Marketplace connects buyers and sellers worldwide. With more than 23 million items available and thousands of sellers, this is a resource for new releases and hard-to-find items. The Marketplace is built on top of the Discogs database, enabling sellers to list their inventory and buyers to specify the exact version they want. Originally created as a hobby project, Discogs.com has grown to become a definitive resource for vinyl and CD recordings. Discogs.com says its data will always be open and free to the public.

Eddie Bauer
**Founded:** 1920
**Headquarters:** Bellevue, Washington
**Workforce:** Approximately 10,000
**Retail Locations:** 370
**Summary:** Eddie Bauer is a sportswear company that offers clothing, accessories and outdoor gear for men and women. Stiff competition has led the retailer to launch a new campaign to regain its market share on outdoor apparel.

Ethan Allen Interiors
**Founded:** 1932
**Headquarters:** Danbury, Connecticut
**Workforce:** 4,800
**Retail Locations:** 300
**Summary:** Ethan Allen Interiors is an interior and design company with 300 design centers in the U.S. and Canada. The company designs and builds most of what they sell. The much anticipated release of the Ethan Allen Disney collection is now available.

Etsy
**Founded:** 2005
**Headquarters:** Brooklyn, New York
**Workforce:** 979
**Retail Locations:** Online only
**Summary:** Etsy is an online, global community where people around the world are able to connect online and offline to buy and sell unique items. Focused on supporting sellers, Pattern by Etsy is offered to allow users to create their own custom website.

Family Dollar Stores
**Founded:** 1959
**Headquarters:** Charlotte, North Carolina
**Workforce:** 60,000
**Retail Locations:** 8,000
**Summary:** Family Dollar is a fast-growing retailer that offers an assortment of merchandise for families. Many items sold are less than $1, and most items are priced under $10. Family Dollar, Bank of America and the NBA’s Charlotte Hornets have partnered to provide more than 10,000 care packages for U.S. military service members. Family Dollar’s Family Hope Community Foundation gives back to organizations that help local families.

Five Below
**Founded:** 2002
**Headquarters:** Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
**Workforce:** 5,500
**Retail Locations:** 500
**Summary:** Five Below is a discount retailer with 500 stores in 31 states that sells products priced up to $5. The chain’s target market is pre-teens and teens, but it also offers many products for adults. Products are grouped into one of eight “worlds”: Style, Room, Sports, Tech, Crafts, Party, Candy and Now.
FragranceNet.com
Founded: 1997
Headquarters: Deer Park, New York
Workforce: Not listed
Retail Locations: Online only
Summary: Fragrance.net is an online retailer that carries 15,000 brand name fragrances, skin care products, makeup, haircare items, aromatherapy products, and candles at discount prices. Its wholesale division Partners Program gives those who allow a link to Fragrancenet.com from their website the opportunity to earn income.

Fry’s Home Electronics
Founded: 1985
Headquarters: San Jose, California
Workforce: 14,000
Retail Locations: 34
Summary: Fry’s Home Electronics is an electronics retailer with 34 locations. Each store features fantasy-themed motifs. Fry’s offers a large selection of computer components and accessories, DVDs, software and snacks. In 2016, in celebration of its 31st anniversary, Fry’s paid the sales tax for customers and price matched more than 250 products, in-store, with promo codes.

GameStop
Founded: 1984, originally run by Babbage’s, a Dallas, Texas-based software retailer
Headquarters: Grapevine, Texas
Workforce: 20,000
Retail Locations: 7,117
Summary: GameStop is a global multi-channel retailer of video games, consumer electronics and wireless services. It has 7,117 locations in 14 countries. GameStop offers a buy-sell-trade program for videogame hardware, physical and digital videogame software, PC entertainment software, and accessories. The company also has a mobile business that consists primarily of pre-owned mobile devices, tablets and related accessories. GameStop also operates electronic commerce websites.

Giant Eagle
Founded: 1931
Headquarters: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Workforce: 36,000
Retail Locations: Nearly 400
Summary: Giant Eagle is a supermarket chain that serves more than 5 million customers annually through nearly 400 retail locations in Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia and Maryland. Stores range in size from 120,000-square-foot supermarkets to small neighborhood markets and fuel and convenience locations. Giant Eagle supermarkets carry an array of groceries and feature a full-service pharmacy, bakery, dry cleaner, deli and cheese shop. In 2016, the chain began selling its own meal kits similar to start-ups such as Plated, Blue Apron and Hello Fresh.

H&M
Founded: 1947
Headquarters: Stockholm, Sweden
Workforce: 148,000
Retail Locations: 4,300
Summary: H&M Hennes & Mauritz AB is a Swedish multinational retail clothing company known for its fashion apparel for men, women, teenagers and children. The H&M group comprises six independent brands: H&M, COS, Cheap Monday, Monki, Weekday and & Other Stories. The H&M group has more than 4,300 stores in more than 64 markets worldwide. E-commerce is available in 35 markets. Sustainability is an integral part of H&M’s business model. H&M’s iCollect program allows shoppers to bring in bags of their old clothing in return for a 15-percent-off coupon. Wearable clothing is sold to vintage and second-hand retailers, while damaged clothing is re-used for the likes of car seat stuffing and insulation, or broken down and used to make new textiles. A small amount is up-cycled into new clothing.

Harris Teeter Supermarkets
Founded: 1936
Headquarters: Matthews, North Carolina
Workforce: 30,000
Retail Locations: 243
Summary: Harris Teeter is a wholly-owned subsidiary of The Kroger Co. It operates 243 stores and seven fuel centers in seven states and the District of Columbia. Stores feature grocery items, a bakery, dairy products, a deli, frozen foods, meat, a pharmacy, produce, seafood, snacks and flowers. In addition to its retail stores, Harris Teeter also owns grocery, frozen food and perishable distribution centers in Greensboro, North Carolina and Indian Trail, North Carolina, as well as a dairy in High Point, North Carolina. Harris Teeter’s Fresh Foods Market offers made-to-order sandwiches and wraps daily. In November 2016, the chain introduced the “Hog Mollie” as Harris Teeter’s third Signature Sub Sandwich of the 2016-17 NFL football season. Carolina Panthers’ guard Andrew Norwell of the NFL teamed with Harris Teeter to debut his personally designed sandwich.
H-E-B
Founded: 1905
Headquarters: San Antonio, Texas
Workforce: 76,000+
Retail Locations: 340+
Summary: H-E-B Grocery Company LP, also known as H-E-B Grocery Stores, is an American privately held supermarket chain with more than 340 stores throughout Texas, as well as in northeast Mexico. Strengthening its commitment to offering customers food choices free from unwanted ingredients, in 2016 H-E-B is introduced H-E-B Select Ingredients, a line consisting of H-E-B brand products excluding more than 200 synthetic ingredients, high fructose corn syrup and artificial flavors. More than 400 Select Ingredients products are available at H-E-B stores.

Hot Topic
Founded: 1988
Headquarters: Industry, California
Workforce: 10,000+
Retail Locations: 650+
Summary: Hot Topic is an American retailer of music and pop culture licensed apparel, accessories and gifts, as well as licensed music. The retailer is owned by private equity firm Sycamore Partners and has stores in the U.S., Canada and Puerto Rico. Through in-store and online donations, The Hot Topic Foundation helps support music and arts education in schools. Key partnerships with organizations such as The Grammy Foundation, Little Kids Rock, and Notes for Notes have helped The Hot Topic Foundation raise over $9 million dollars since it was founded in 2004.

Hy-Vee
Founded: 1930
Headquarters: West Des Moines, Iowa
Workforce: 82,000+
Retail Locations: 242
Summary: Hy-Vee is an employee-owned chain of more than 240 supermarkets across eight Midwestern states. To help combat the nation’s food waste issue, Hy-Vee recently began offering so-called “ugly” produce in nearly all of its stores. “Ugly” produce is cosmetically challenged fruits and vegetables that would traditionally go unsold due to the industry’s size and shape standards. However, a movement to make this imperfect produce culturally acceptable to purchase and available to consumers has been gaining popularity in the U.S. Hy-Vee has partnered with produce company Robinson Fresh to offer its line of Misfits produce. Misfits provides customers more fruit and vegetable variety at a lower cost while also helping to reduce produce waste. Four to six Misfit items are delivered to stores weekly, based on what is seasonally available, and are sold on average at a 30-percent discount. Some of the line’s items include peppers, cucumbers, squash, apples and tomatoes.

IKEA North America
Founded: 1985
Headquarters: Conshohocken, Pennsylvania
Workforce: Not listed
Retail Locations: 55+
Summary: IKEA is a privately held, international home products company that designs and sells ready-to-assemble furniture such as beds, chairs, desks, appliances and home accessories. The company is the world’s largest furniture retailer. Sustainability is one of IKEA’s core values. It is working on tackling climate change, conserving natural resources and enabling millions of customers to live more sustainably at home.

J. Higgins Ltd
Founded: 1983
Headquarters: Lenexa, Kansas
Workforce: 30
Retail Locations: 1
Summary: J. Higgins offers an assortment of Highland products from kilts, kilt outfits, Scottish clothing and kilt accessories, to bagpipes, drums and bagpipe supplies. Apparel is available for men, women and boys. The store’s own tailors, seamstresses, knitters and bagpipers manufacture J. Higgins’ products. J. Higgins has two general types of products: stock and custom. Stock items may be returned or exchanged within one year if you are not completely satisfied. Custom products cannot be returned or exchanged due to their individualized nature.

J. Crew
Founded: 1983
Headquarters: New York, New York
Workforce: 15,600
Retail Locations: 283
Summary: J. Crew sells women’s, men’s and children’s apparel, shoes and accessories and designs, markets and sells products under the J. Crew, crewcuts and Madewell brands. The company operates retail and outlet stores, J. Crew and Madewell websites, and a catalog business. J Crew operates 283 retail stores, 147 factory stores and 89 Madewell stores worldwide. The retailer relies on the J. Crew catalog as the primary vehicle for marketing and advertising. The catalog, which drives in-store as well as direct sales, utilizes high-quality photography and art direction to burnish the J. Crew brand. The company spent $48.5 million on catalog advertising in fiscal 2016, compared to $47.4 million and $51.6 million in fiscal 2015 and 2014, respectively.
Jos. A. Bank  
**Founded:** 1905  
**Headquarters:** Hampstead, Maryland  
**Workforce:** 6,340  
**Retail Locations:** 630  
**Summary:** Jos. A. Bank is a designer, manufacturer, retailer and direct marketer of men's tailored and casual clothing and accessories, and is a retailer of tuxedo rental products. It sells substantially all of its products exclusively under the Jos. A. Bank label through its more than 630 retail stores located throughout 44 states and the District of Columbia in the U.S., as well as through the company's nationwide catalog and internet operations. It sources substantially all of its merchandise from suppliers and manufacturers or through buying agents using Jos. A. Bank designs and specifications. The company operates in two segments: Stores and Direct Marketing. The Stores segment consists of all company-owned stores, excluding outlet and factory stores. The Direct Marketing segment consists of its internet and catalog operations. The business was acquired following a protracted battle by its larger rival The Men's Wearhouse in June 2014.

Kate Spade  
**Founded:** 1993  
**Headquarters:** New York, New York  
**Workforce:** 6,800  
**Retail Locations:** 220  
**Summary:** Kate Spade is a designer and marketer of accessories and apparel under the Kate Spade New York and Jack Spade banners. The company operates about 220 specialty shops and outlet stores in the U.S. and abroad, and also sells apparel and accessories online and to department stores. It also owns the Adelington Design Group and supplies JC Penney stores with the Liz Claiborne and Monet jewelry lines. To reflect its mono-brand focus, the company (formerly Fifth & Pacific) changed its name in 2014 and discontinued its once-premium brands of Liz Claiborne, Juicy Couture and Lucky Brand. The company generates about 80 percent of its sales in the U.S. The retailer operates about 168 specialty and outlet stores in the U.S. and another 35 overseas, including about 50 locations in Japan. In 2016, Kate Spade and Reliance Brands Limited, a renowned retail partner-of-choice in India, signed an agreement to bring the Kate Spade New York brand to India through a long-term distribution and retail license agreement. Under the terms of the agreement, Reliance Brands Limited will have the exclusive distribution rights to the Kate Spade New York brand in the country. The deal was part of company's strategy to expand geographically and build global brand engagement.

Kmart  
**Founded:** 1899  
**Headquarters:** Hoffman Estates, Illinois  
**Workforce:** 178,000  
**Retail Locations:** 1,150  
**Summary:** Kmart is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Sears Holdings Corporation and accounts for more than a third of its sales. Kmart is a leading U.S. discount retailer, behind Walmart, Target and Kohl's. It sells name-brand and private-label goods, mostly to low- and mid-income families. It runs about 1,150 off-mall stores, including 17 Super Centers, in 49 states, Puerto Rico, Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands. About 270 Kmart stores sell home appliances, (including Sears' Kenmore brand, and some 840 locations house in-store pharmacies. Poor sales have forced its parent, Sears Holdings Corp., to close more than 300 Kmart stores since merging Kmart with Sears in 2005. Kmart also operates the kmart.com website, which includes merchandise from Sears.

Lands' End  
**Founded:** 1963  
**Headquarters:** Dodgeville, Wisconsin  
**Workforce:** 6,000  
**Retail Locations:** 200+  
**Summary:** Lands' End is a multi-channel international retailer of casual apparel for men, women and children, accessories, footwear and home products. The company offers products through catalogs, online and through retail locations, primarily at Lands' End Shops at Sears and standalone Lands' End Inlet Stores. There are more than 200 Lands’ End Shops at Sears, Lands' End Inlets and standalone Lands’ End stores. The company has approximately 6,000 employees globally. In 2016, Lands’ End announced that its Squall Parka earned the coveted Good Housekeeping Seal, one of the most recognized consumer emblems in the world.

Meijer  
**Founded:** 1934  
**Headquarters:** Grand Rapids, Michigan  
**Workforce:** 77,000  
**Retail Locations:** 230  
**Summary:** Meijer is a family-owned grocery chain operating in the Midwest. Meijer operates 230 stores throughout Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Kentucky. The supercenter stores offer groceries as well as departments such as fashion, automotive, home decor, health and beauty care, pharmacy, electronics, and banking. Meijer pioneered the idea of a superstore when, in 1962, it opened its first Thrifty Acres, a food and general merchandise store that allowed customers to shop for everything they needed with just one trip to the...
store. In addition to its large combination grocery and general merchandise stores, Meijer operates about 175 gas stations, a pair of car washes and about a half a dozen smaller Meijer Grocery Express stores. In January 2017, Meijer announced that it tapped Stacy London, one of America’s foremost style experts, to help shape the style direction for its on-trend women’s clothing line, Massini. London is best known as the co-host of TLC’s “What Not to Wear” and “Love Lust or Run,” and is a New York Times best-selling author. In her role, London will serve as a style consultant to help the Meijer Style team continue its focus to evolve the Massini line with affordable trends for everyday wear.

Menards
Founded: 1958
Headquarters: Eau Claire, Wisconsin
Workforce: 45,000+
Retail Locations: 300+
Summary: Menards is a family-owned home improvement chain that sells lumber and products in categories such as hardware, tools, paint, pet supplies, appliances, and lawn and garden. Menard is also involved in residential real estate development, with several large subdivisions under construction and development in Indiana and Illinois. The company operates more than 300 stores in 14 states throughout the Midwest.

Michaels Stores
Founded: 1976
Headquarters: Irving, Texas
Workforce: 48,000+
Retail Locations: 1,368
Summary: The Michaels Companies Inc. is a specialty provider of arts, crafts, framing, floral, wall decor, and seasonal merchandise for the hobbyist and do-it-yourself home decorator. The company owns and operates 1,368 stores in 49 states and Canada under the brands Michaels, Aaron Brothers and Pat Catan’s. The Michaels Companies Inc. also owns Artstitute, a manufacturer of custom and specialty framing merchandise, and Darice, a wholesale distributor in the craft, gift and decor industry. Additionally, The Michaels Companies Inc. produces a number of exclusive private brands.

NAPA Auto Parts
Founded: 1925
Headquarters: Atlanta, Georgia
Workforce: 39,000+
Retail Locations: 6,000+
Summary: NAPA serves auto service professionals, do-it-yourselfers and everyday drivers with parts and supplies to keep cars, trucks and equipment performing safely and efficiently. In the U.S., NAPA now includes more than 58 distribution centers, 16,000 NAPA AutoCare Centers and more than 6,000 independently-owned and company-owned stores. NAPA carries an inventory of more than 475,000 parts for automotive and industrial applications. A division of Genuine Parts Company and a global automotive aftermarket provider, NAPA operates NAPA Canada, Auto Todo in Mexico and Repco in Australia and New Zealand. Most NAPA Stores and NAPA AutoCare Centers locations are independently owned and operated, and make their own hiring decisions.

Newegg.com
Founded: 2001
Headquarters: City of Industry, California
Workforce: 2,600
Retail Locations: Online only
Summary: Newegg.com is an online-only retailer that offers customers a selection of consumer electronics products, detailed product descriptions and images, as well as how-to information and customer reviews. Using the site's online tech community, customers have the opportunity to interact with other computer, gaming and consumer electronics enthusiasts. Newegg.com has more than 25 million registered users. Outside of the United States, Newegg also has websites that serve the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Singapore, Ireland, Poland and India.

Nike
Founded: 1964
Headquarters: Beaverton, Oregon
Workforce: 62,600
Retail Locations: 1,045
Summary: Nike is a leading designer, marketer and distributor of authentic athletic footwear, apparel, equipment and accessories for a wide variety of sports and fitness activities. The company operates more than 1,045 retail stores worldwide. Wholly-owned Nike subsidiaries include Converse Inc., which designs, markets and distributes athletic footwear, apparel and accessories, and Hurley International LLC, which designs, markets and distributes action sports and youth lifestyle footwear, apparel and accessories. Reportable operating segments for the Nike brand are: North America, Western Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, China, Japan and emerging markets.

Old Navy
Founded: 1994
Headquarters: San Francisco, California
Workforce: 65,000
Retail Locations: 1,106
Summary: Old Navy is a clothing and accessories retailing...
company owned by American multinational corporation Gap Inc., which also owns the Banana Republic, Athleta and Intermix brands. In 1997, Old Navy became first retailer to reach $1 billion in annual sales in less than four years of operation. Old Navy has 1,106 retail stores worldwide that sell apparel for men, women, children and babies. Old Navy Active is a new line of fitness apparel. Gap’s clothes are available in 90 countries worldwide through 3,300 company-operated stores, almost 400 franchise stores and e-commerce sites.

Petco
Founded: 1965
Headquarters: San Diego, California
Workforce: 25,000+
Retail Locations: 1,500+
Summary: Petco is a specialty retailer of pet food, live animals, supplies and services. It operates more than 1,500 locations across the U.S., Mexico and Puerto Rico, including more than 85 Unleashed by Petco locations, a smaller format neighborhood shop. Additionally, it offers prescription services and pet supplies from the veterinary-operated pet product supplier Drs. Foster & Smith. In 2006, private equity firms Texas Pacific Group and Leonard Green & Partners took the company private. Petco began 2017 by celebrating the grand re-opening of 14 remodeled stores in Los Angeles. Last year, Petco expanded its retail presence nationwide by opening 71 new stores and one new Unleashed by Petco store, remodeling 41 stores and expanding five stores.

Orchard Supply Hardware
Founded: 1931
Headquarters: San Jose, California
Workforce: 5,400 (as of June, 2013)
Retail Locations: 80+
Summary: The American home improvement and gardening product retailer began as a non-profit cooperative, then became a for-profit company before being acquired by several parent companies in the 1980s. Sears bought it in 1996 and then in June, 2013 it was bought by Lowe’s and runs as a subsidiary. In 2014 the brand was part of a pilot ‘robot’ program. The technology is aimed at helping customers research products and then locate products in the store. The Lowe’s strategy is to use the brand for urban regions. In 2016 the retailer opened a South Florida brand location. After its acquisition by Lowe’s the company updated the vintage store location to more modern footprints with wider aisles and colorful signage. It also created a “Workbench” service area where customers have access to professionals offering a wide range of services such as knife sharpening, lock re-keying and rope cutting.

Overstock.com
Founded: 1999
Headquarters: Cottonwood Heights, Utah
Workforce: 1,500
Retail Locations: Online only
Summary: Overstock.com is an online retailer offering brand-name merchandise at discount prices. The company offers its customers an opportunity to shop for bargains conveniently, while offering its suppliers an alternative inventory distribution channel. More than 6 million products are available on the site. Current offerings span from furniture and home decor to cars. Rugs, bedding, electronics, clothing, and jewelry are other available products. Additional stores within Overstock include Worldstock.com, which is dedicated to selling artisan-crafted products to help developing nations around the world, and Main Street Revolution, supporting small-scale entrepreneurs in the U.S. by providing them with a national customer base.

REI
Founded: 1938
Headquarters: Kent, Washington
Workforce: 12,000
Retail Locations: 150
Summary: REI, also known as Recreational Equipment Inc., has made its mark being an outdoor specialty retailer as well as one of the largest consumer co-ops. While anyone can shop at REI, members pay a one-time $20 membership fee, allowing voting privileges to the elect board of directors and share in the co-op’s profits through an annual member refund based upon purchases. REI, has its own line of high-quality, award-winning apparel and gear. There are 150 REI retail locations in 35 states.
Rite Aid

**Founded:** 1962  
**Headquarters:** Camp Hill, Pennsylvania  
**Workforce:** 88,000  
**Retail Locations:** 4,600  
**Summary:** Rite Aid has 4,600 stores in 31 states and offers a selection of health and beauty aids, personal care products, seasonal items, and its own private brand products. Rite Aid's Wellness+Plenti rewards program offers points on specially marked items, the ability to load coupons and exclusive offers for members only.

Ross Stores

**Founded:** 1982  
**Headquarters:** Dublin, California  
**Workforce:** 77,800  
**Retail Locations:** 1,367  
**Summary:** The off-price retailer has a “no frills” mantra, and its sparsely decorated stores focus on what shoppers want: cheap clothing, accessories, footwear and housewares. The company’s two brands, Ross and dd’s DISCOUNTS, focus on merchandising, efficiency, lean inventory levels and constant product turnover keep shoppers coming back for more. Currently in 36 states, the company’s been having a growth spurt, adding 21 net new stores in 2016, with more expansion planned.

Safeway

**Founded:** 1915  
**Headquarters:** Pleasanton, California  
**Workforce:** 137,000  
**Retail Locations:** 1,282  
**Summary:** The full-service grocery retailer, which merged with Albertsons in 2015, has stores in 19 states. It thrives due to its O Organics private label in investment in technology. In addition to offering one-hour delivery windows, its new mobile app Just for U gives shoppers coupons and personalized savings, and it’s participating in a USDA pilot to offer online grocery shopping to low-income individuals on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Sam’s Club

**Founded:** 2004  
**Headquarters:** Fort Meyers, Florida  
**Workforce:** 22,700 across all three brands of Chico’s FAS  
**Retail Locations:** 274 boutiques, 19 outlets, 31 franchises in Mexico  
**Summary:** A unit of Chico’s FAS, Soma caters intimate apparel, home, apparel and grocery, including the club’s own Member’s Mark brand, and provide 16 million unique visits each month on its m-commerce app. This year it launched in-store Scan & Go shopping through its app.

Rite Aid

**Founded:** 1962  
**Headquarters:** Camp Hill, Pennsylvania  
**Workforce:** 88,000  
**Retail Locations:** 4,600  
**Summary:** Rite Aid has 4,600 stores in 31 states and offers a selection of health and beauty aids, personal care products, seasonal items, and its own private brand products. Rite Aid's Wellness+Plenti rewards program offers points on specially marked items, the ability to load coupons and exclusive offers for members only.

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**Retail Locations:** 274 boutiques, 19 outlets, 31 franchises in Mexico  
**Summary:** A unit of Chico’s FAS, Soma caters intimate apparel
and swimwear to the over-35 set. The retailer has been intent on improving the shopping experience to leverage the digital and physical retail environments. Soma attempt at a quick turnover merchandising strategy flopped with they discovered their best customers didn’t shop in stores often enough to see the new products before they were discounted. In 2017 Soma will start rolling out enterprise-wide inventory visibility to allow customers to find SKUs at a certain store. The program will also leverage Locate, Ship from Store and Buy Online, Ship to Store features.

### Staples

**Founded:** 1986  
**Headquarters:** Framingham, Massachusetts  
**Workforce:** 75,000+ worldwide  
**Retail Locations:** 1,572 in North America  
**Summary:** Staples has a new CEO in company veteran Shira Goodman, and it also has a renewed focus. The office-supply retailer’s BO$$ strategy looks beyond office supplies to jolt its revenue, particularly with its prime business customers who drive 80 percent of sales. The company developed a new multiplatform website and new iPad and iPhone apps to target omni-channel users. It now offers Print-to-Store and Buy Online, Pick up in Store features and is piloting a Ship from Store option. The company is testing voice-enabled Easy Button reordering through Staples Easy System, powered by IBM’s Watson cognitive platform. The shift to an online focus has the company shuttering stores and exiting markets: It closed around 50 locations, Ship from Store and Buy Online, Ship to Store features.

### Starbucks

**Founded:** 1971  
**Headquarters:** Seattle, Washington  
**Workforce:** 300,000  
**Retail Locations:** 24,000 stores in 70 countries  
**Summary:** This year CEO Howard Schultz will become executive chairman, handing over the reins of the coffee retailer to COO Kevin Johnson. While the company is focusing on store growth--12,000 in the next five years--and “premiumization” with its Roasteries, new Starbucks Reserve format and Princi Italian food partnership, it’s also beefing up its mobile platform. This year it will test My Starbucks Barista, a conversational AI-powered ordering system where customers can place orders via voice command or messaging interface. It’s also upped its personalization game, with over 400,000 variations of e-mail reward offerings and personalized mobile app offers.

### TJ Maxx

**Founded:** 1976  
**Headquarters:** Framingham, Massachusetts  
**Workforce:** 216,000 (across all ten brands)  
**Retail Locations:** 1,179  
**Summary:** With most retailers focusing on an omni-channel experience, TJ Maxx bucks that trend by focusing on what it does best: Creating a treasure hunt experience to search for great bargains in off-price fashion, beauty and housewares. Store managers don’t even know what will be in stores until it arrives, which is why stores have a flexible plan to expand and contract as needed. Multiple shipments each week mean that TJ Maxx can respond quickly to customer trends and localize product accordingly. Lately, the chain has been beefing up its online presence to drive retail traffic.

### Toys “R” Us

**Founded:** 1948  
**Headquarters:** Wayne, New Jersey  
**Workforce:** 62,000 worldwide for Toys “R” Us and Babies “R” Us brands  
**Retail Locations:** 1,661 (this includes 906 traditional toy, 420 side-by-side [toy/baby], 237 baby, and 98 permanent express/outlet.  
**Summary:** The venerable toy retailer is learning that e-commerce is where it’s at when it comes to selling toys. Sales are down in Toys “R” Us’ brick-and-mortar shops, and it’s closing stores, including its New York City flagship store. However, the retailer’s e-commerce sales are up. This is in part due to a focused effort on creating an omni-channel experience so that whether they’re in-store or at home, customers can shop any way they want. The company’s shopping app also scans barcodes for product information while in store and shows videos of kids’ favorite toys in action.

### Tractor Supply Co.

**Founded:** 1938  
**Headquarters:** Brentwood, Tennessee  
**Workforce:** 24,000+  
**Retail Locations:** 1,600  
**Summary:** At the largest operator of rural lifestyle retail stores in the country, you can buy everything you need for the farm--except a tractor. Located in 49 states, the stores serve towns in outlying major markets and rural communities with its exclusive brands. In 2016, TSC acquired Petsense, a specialty retailer, to add to its large pet care section. The company is rolling out its new Neighbor’s Club seasonal rewards program that enhances the company’s customer engagement and attribution with new rewards each three-month season, birthday benefits and member-only offers.

### True Value

**Founded:** 1948  
**Headquarters:** Chicago, Illinois  
**Workforce:** 2,500  
**Retail Locations:** 4,400  
**Summary:** Highly ranked by both Temkin and JD Power in terms of client satisfaction and customer service, True Value’s...
retailer-owned co-op stands up to the big box DIY stores with its personal service and smaller-format stores. A renewed effort to target new home owners in their mid-30s has been successful, as True Value has been able to fill this group’s needs for personal, trustworthy service. It’s developed a set of websites to help these customers research their projects, and a ship-to-store e-commerce initiative has seen success, with over 80 percent of TrueValue.com shoppers choosing this option—and purchasing an average of $35 more when they picked up their orders.

**Verizon Wireless**

*Founded: 2000*

*Headquarters: Basking Ridge, New Jersey*

*Workforce: Verizon (including wireless) is 162,000*

*Retail Locations: Company doesn’t disclose*

*Summary: Verizon Wireless’ 4G LTE Advanced network covers over 450 cities across the country and gives users 50 percent faster peak speeds. However, Verizon Wireless is at work on 5G technology, which promises connection speeds that are 30 to 50 times faster than 4G. It's on track to deploy a fixed commercial wireless fiber launch in 2017. In 2016 Verizon Wireless also launched a new program for multicultural entrepreneurs to launch specialty stores and is first targeting the Hispanic market with this initiative. The company also opened its first “Verizon Experience” store in Texas, a 5,000 square-foot store where customers can play and interact with its wireless and broadband services.*

**Whole Foods Market**

*Founded: 1978*

*Headquarters: Austin, Texas*

*Workforce: 87,000+*

*Retail Locations: 468 - 42 states, UK (12 stores), Canada (9 stores)*

*Summary: Whole Foods might be nicknamed “Whole Paycheck,” but the company has successfully launched a value format called 365 by Whole Foods. The no-frills stores offer fewer items than the traditional banner but feature local beer and vendors, as well as a loyalty program. The Whole Foods banner pays homage to Vita, an old-fashioned grocery store that was a part of the Cooper Fresh Market in Austin, Texas. The banner logo--which has 19 stores across six states--is recognizable from afar by a signature cupola. The company prides itself on top-notch customer service. Everyday perks include free delivery, complimentary gift-wrapping, a no questions asked customer return policy, alterations and an interest-free charge card. The company has started to open more stores in the Midwest, including its Dry Goods vintage aesthetic retail concept, which has 19 stores across six states.*

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**Van Maur**

*Founded: 1872*

*Headquarters: Davenport, Iowa*

*Workforce:*

*Retail Locations: 31*

*Summary: One of the few remaining family-owned and operated department stores, Von Maur stores—with locations in 14 states—are recognizable from afar by a signature cupola. The company prides itself on top-notch customer service. Everyday perks include free delivery, complimentary gift-wrapping, a no questions asked customer return policy, alterations and an interest-free charge card. The company has started to open more stores in the Midwest, including its Dry Goods vintage aesthetic retail concept, which has 19 stores across six states.*

**Wegmans Food Market**

*Founded: 1916*

*Headquarters: Rochester, New York*

*Workforce: 47,000+*

*Retail Locations: 92*

*Summary: The northeast-based grocery chain has fanatic customers who flock to experience Wegman’s unique grocery format. The company, which celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2016, is known for stocking 10,000-30,000 more SKUs than the average grocery store, including over 3,000 organic products. Customers love the quality, freshness and good prices. Stores also include a market café where customers can grab a quick bite or take home a restaurant-quality meal. It recently lowered prices on more than 40 of its dairy, grocery and frozen private label products that families use most.*
has experienced enhancement as well. The company has added Instacart ordering on its website and digital coupons and sales flyers to its mobile app. This year it’s piloting a new rewards program including features like automatic digital coupons.

### Williams-Sonoma

**Founded:** 1956  
**Headquarters:** San Francisco, California  
**Workforce:** 28,100 across all of the parent company’s eight brands  
**Retail Locations:** 239  
**Summary:** Williams-Sonoma celebrates the world of cooking with premium cookware and exceptional customer service. The retail experience is key to the brand’s success, as stores offer equipment demonstrations, complimentary cooking classes, and book signings with culinary authors and specialty food tastings. However, with store sales down, the brand is shuttering locations—including its store at the Mall of America—and increasing its e-commerce efforts. In 2017 it’s launching product exclusives, including Sadie Street tabletop (a partnership with kate spade new york and Lenox) and the relaunch of All-Clad’s LTD cookware line.

### Zappos

**Founded:** 1999  
**Headquarters:** Las Vegas, Nevada  
**Workforce:** 1,500  
**Retail Locations:** 0  
**Summary:** The online-only shoe, clothing and accessories retailer earns customer loyalty by providing great customer service, including free shipping and a 365-day return policy. In 2016 it launched Zappos Rewards, its first loyalty program. Customers receive points on purchases, free expedited shipping, early access to sales and an exclusive customer service number. The e-tailer has plans for greater interaction with its customers by experimenting with pop-up stores. It’s also going on the road—literally—to meet its customers during its Friends with Benefits Road Show that will crisscross the country offering shopping, local food and drink, music and free pet adoptions.

### Yankee Candle Company

**Founded:** 1969  
**Headquarters:** Deerfield, Massachusetts  
**Workforce:** 1,600 (2013 number)  
**Retail Locations:** 500+ company stores  
**Summary:** The company’s fragrant candles have a devout following—each year its main factory in Massachusetts produces more than 200 million candles and over half a million visit its 90,000 square-foot Bay State flagship store. The company sells through its own outlets, authorized retailers, direct mail and Internet channels. New parent Newell Rubbermaid has invested in a new touch-screen POS system to connect with shoppers in-store, but it’s also had to deal with a holiday candle recall involving thousands of units.

### WinCo Foods

**Founded:** 1967  
**Headquarters:** Boise, Idaho  
**Workforce:** 15,000+  
**Retail Locations:** 110  
**Summary:** Low prices aren’t enough for this employee-owned grocery chain with locations in eight western states. In order to undercut other grocers, it deals directly with food providers, asks customers to bag their own groceries and doesn’t accept credit cards. Many of the company’s green initiatives are also designed to save money, whether it’s by printing circulars less often or testing solar-powered parking lot lights. The no-frills take makes WinCo (short for “Winning Company”) a hit with its customers, and has propelled company expansion into Texas. Its next stop? Montana.

### Zara

**Founded:** 1975 (first Zara store; Inditex founded in 1963)  
**Headquarters:** Arteixo, A Coruña, Spain  
**Workforce:** 153,000 (for all of Inditex Group’s eight brands, 2015 number)  
**Retail Locations:** 2,100  
**Summary:** Zara has conquered the world (it has locations in 88 countries) with its own brand of cheap fast fashion. How fast? The company can design, make and ship an item in about a month. This strategy to manufacture in small batches heightens exclusivity. The twice-weekly store deliveries is one reason customers keep coming back, but their feedback keeps the design team precisely on trend, delivering what people want to wear right now. In response to an outcry for more sustainable fashion, Zara’s started its Join Life line, which has simpler designs and clothing made from more sustainable products.
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