

TOP SHELF

Kroger Combats Hunger, Improves Communities

By Matt Ottinger

Eric Halvorson was known in central Indiana as a newscaster before joining The Kroger Co. in 2016, where he now serves as manager of corporate affairs for its central division.

He relishes the role and has enjoyed the foray into an action-packed industry.

“It’s a fascinating life seeing the inside of the grocery business because for so long, most of my life, I was a Kroger customer and food just magically appeared on the shelves,” he quips. “I never had any real sense of how it got there and how many people it takes to make something as big as Kroger work.”

He credits his many coworkers who keep the stores stocked and clean, as well as cashiers and others ensuring the grocer maximizes customer service. Halvorson notes Kroger, headquartered in Cincinnati, Ohio, is in about two-thirds of the U.S. currently and his Indianapolis-based division encompasses four states and 129 stores.

“It’s remarkably competitive,” Halvorson offers. “It’s an intense business start to finish. I used to think I had a busy career in television news, but now I’m probably putting in more hours every day here than I did in my former life just because of the intensity of the work and the demands.”

Indeed, the company continues to innovate and expand. For instance, according to reports in September, The Kroger Co. grew digital and total sales in its fiscal second quarter as digital sales increased at nearly 10 times the rate of total sales (excluding fuel). Total Kroger sales in the quarter reached \$33.91 billion, up from \$33.85 billion for the same period in 2023.

Putting it to good use

But it’s not just revenue the grocer strives to expand. It’s also the impact it has on its communities.

Combating hunger has become a priority through Kroger’s “Zero Hunger | Zero Waste” plan, which was launched five years ago. Through the program, the company picks up fresh produce and perishable items from its stores that would otherwise go to waste, sorts them and distributes them to partner agencies.

Kroger’s website relays that 38% of food produced in the U.S. is thrown away, meaning 229 million tons of surplus available food goes unsold or uneaten every year, in addition to food left unharvested on farms. Meanwhile, nearly 42 million Americans – one in eight – struggle with hunger.

“We wanted to end hunger in Kroger communities, and we’re still working very hard on that; initially we said we were going to provide three billion meals around the country by 2025, and we did that early last year,” Halvorson relays.

He adds that once a merger between Kroger and the grocery chain Albertsons is complete, the company hopes to provide 10 billion meals by 2030.

“The hunger relief issue is particularly challenging as we’ve all seen,” Halvorson shares. “We’ve watched it through (the COVID-19 pandemic) and the needs have surprisingly, at least surprisingly to me, become worse. Demand is up and donations are down at food banks.

“So, the timing of our Zero Hunger | Zero Waste plan couldn’t be better because we’re working together with food banks all over the country to help them put food on the table and make sure their clients have what they need to provide nutritious meals to the people who come to them for assistance every day,” Halvorson maintains.

The business also is making the most of what can’t go to food banks. One example is in Greensburg where Kroger installed an anaerobic digester at K.B. Specialty Foods, a manufacturing plant owned and operated by the company. The digester, which replaced a conventional wastewater treatment system, features a dome that captures biogas from food byproducts at the plant and converts it into energy through anaerobic digestion while also improving air quality.

“That system gathers some of the gas that comes from the food waste in the water and the gas is then burned for electricity in the plant,”



Kroger’s Annual Shoe Day, in partnership with the Indiana Fever and Indiana Pacers, features Kroger donating a new pair of shoes and socks to Indianapolis Public School students. It’s just one example of its many outreach events.

Halvorson elaborates, noting it reduces greenhouse gases and what's sent to landfills.

Rewarding ventures

Kroger's Community Rewards program also helps non-profits in the areas it serves.

"I tell people that's probably the easiest way to get a donation from Kroger is just to enroll your organization because we will donate back to those partner agencies just based on the shopping habits of their members," Halvorson advises.

He personally connects his card to Second Helpings in Indianapolis and notes the Humane Society for Hamilton County was last year's largest recipient from the program.

Furthermore, Kroger's staffers make it a point to give back as well. Halvorson mentions employees in Fort Wayne who worked together for United Way's Day of Service. He also notes staffers recently engaged in a backpack filling program, stuffing bags with food for Midwest Food Bank in Indianapolis. Associates in Anderson packed a demolition car as part of a charitable initiative, and he points to the Fishers Police Department as another partner.

Halvorson is grateful Kroger has made many partnerships to help organizations across



Kroger's associates in Terre Haute plant trees to celebrate Arbor Day as part of a partnership with the Arbor Day Foundation.

the state succeed in their philanthropic missions.

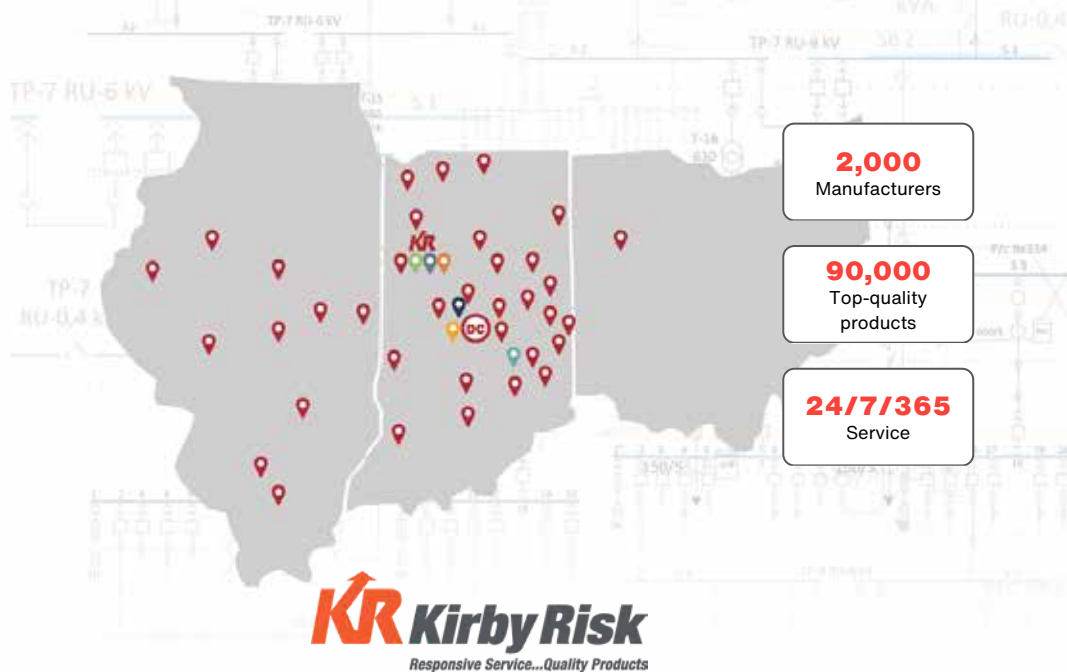
"I also appreciate the opportunity to help first responders, police and firefighters, to let them know we appreciate their service and sacrifice," he imparts. "We have a big donation that we're going to make to a veterans' group here very soon."

Halvorson expresses his pride in how "deeply connected" Kroger is to its communities.

"I thought initially (at the beginning of my tenure) that it's just a grocery store, but it's far more than that," he surmises. "We've been helping organizations in every community of Indiana – and every community across our division – with projects that are important to people in ways that I think most Hoosiers wouldn't know existed."

RESOURCE: Eric Halvorson, The Kroger Co., at www.thekrogerco.com

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