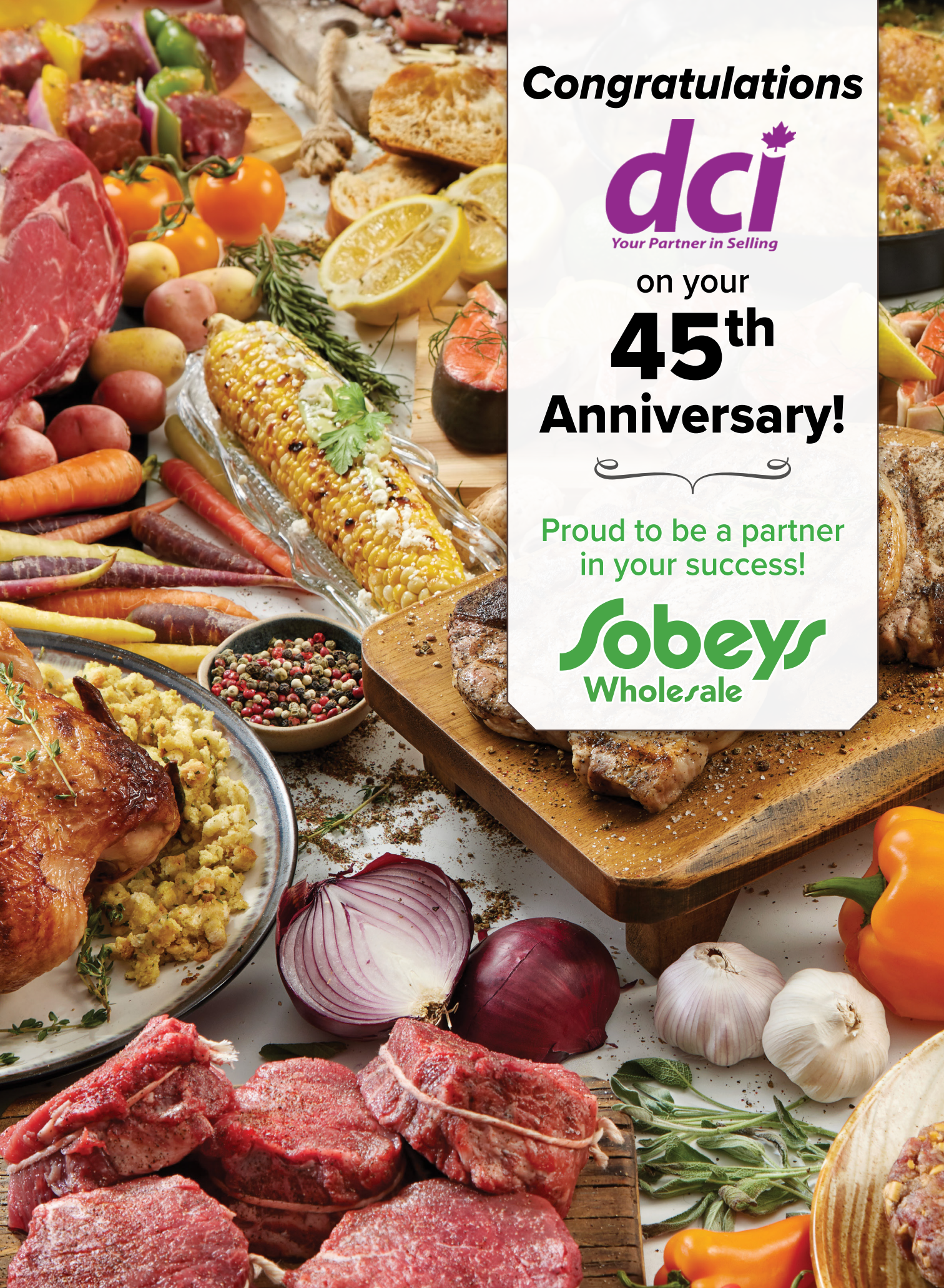




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L-R: Barry Lanteigne, DCI Canada, Mike Sharpe, Sharpe's Food Market



## Independent by design

For 45 years, **DCI** has delivered scale and leverage while keeping independents in control

Independent grocers have never had more on their plates. Costs are rising, consumer expectations are shifting and competition from national chains continues to intensify. Yet every day, across cities, suburbs and rural communities, independents are negotiating with suppliers, planning promotions and adapting in real time to keep pace with the market—often with far fewer resources than their biggest rivals.

And while they may not have the same scale, they're increasingly gaining something just as powerful: shared strength.

That's where Distribution Canada Inc. (DCI) comes in. Even 45 years since its inception, the organization continues to help independent grocers—from single-location operators to multi-store regional businesses—strengthen their competitive position through collective buying power, collaboration and shared access to suppliers and resources.

In a grocery landscape defined by consolidation and constant change, the fact that DCI is still growing underscores that independence and scale don't have to be mutually exclusive.

"Since 1981 we've grown a small network of regional distributors into one of Canada's most respected buying and marketing organizations representing over 100 independent grocers and suppliers nationwide," says Barry Lanteigne, DCI President and Director of Operations. "At the same time, our mission has remained steady: to strengthen the competitive position of independent grocers by creating efficiencies, building relationships and fostering collaboration with trusted supplier partners."

In fact, DCI is coming off its strongest period of growth to date, with membership up more than 50% since 2020, says Lanteigne. At a time when consolidation is reshaping the grocery industry, this growth reflects the continued demand for a collaborative model built specifically around independent operators.

### A strategy built for today's grocery realities

A key fact behind this recent growth is DCI's five-year strategic plan, which was implemented in 2022 and designed to ensure the organization evolves alongside a rapidly changing

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BANDING  
MACHINE



AUTOMATIC WEIGH-  
WRAP- LABELLER



SEMI-AUTOMATIC  
WEIGH-WRAP-  
LABELLER



grocery industry. “The focus has been on growth, technology and connectivity,” says Lanteigne. “Ensuring our members have the tools, insights and partnerships they need to compete and thrive.”

The strategy also reflects a clear understanding of the pressures independent grocers face: rising costs, increased competition from national chains, shifting consumer expectations and the accelerating role of technology. Rather than attempting to redefine independence, the plan is about reinforcing it—supporting what independents already do well while helping them compete more effectively at scale.

“Our evolution has always been rooted in collaboration,” Lanteigne adds. “The spirit of cooperation remains the heart of everything we do.”

In preparing for the future, DCI is focused on relevance and value—ensuring membership delivers tangible benefits back to each retailer’s individual businesses. “We’re not a one-size-fits-all organization,” says Lanteigne.

Case in point: DCI represents 106 members across Canada, spanning a wide range of independent grocery formats and regional markets. That breadth is reflected on the board, where retailers from urban centres, small towns and rural regions contribute equally to decision-making. It’s a model that keeps priorities grounded in day-to-day realities, says Lanteigne.

DCI Treasurer Mike Sharpe, owner of Sharpe’s Food Market and a board member for the past six years, echoes this point. “Barry manages the day-to-day operations, but the direction comes from grocers who are actually in the business,” he says.

For members, one of DCI’s core advantages is collective buying power. Rather than negotiating with suppliers individually, independents are able to approach them as part of a national group—strengthening their position at the table.

DCI negotiates programs and partnerships on behalf of its members, helping level the playing field while preserving autonomy at the store level. Just as importantly, the organization avoids exclusivity in favour of choice.

“We want competition,” says Lanteigne. “Our goal is to give members real options and access to partners that make sense for their individual businesses.” That includes welcoming new and emerging suppliers into the network, a priority reflected in DCI’s expanding portfolio of suppliers.

That philosophy extends beyond traditional grocery categories too. DCI works with a broad range of supplier and service partners—including digital companies, benefits providers and insurance organizations—all with the goal of supporting independent grocers as they focus on running their stores.

### Some long-term member perspectives

For many long-standing members, DCI’s value extends well beyond programs or rebates. Over time, relationships—both with vendors and with fellow independent grocers—have become one of the organization’s most important differentiators.

Gordon Dean, president of Mike Dean Local Grocer—a family-owned independent grocery business with stores in rural Ontario and Quebec, and a DCI member since



*Mike Sharpe, owner of Sharpe’s Food Market*



*Barry Lanteigne, DCI President and Director of Operations.*

“  
**The focus has  
been on growth,  
technology and  
connectivity”**

– *Barry Lanteigne, DCI President  
and Director of Operations*



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the mid-1980s—points to access as a defining advantage. “Getting into the same room as decision-makers, especially at mid- and large-sized vendors, is massively important for an independent,” he says. “Those conversations don’t happen easily on your own.”

Equally important, Dean says, is the peer network created by DCI’s national footprint. Because members operate in different regions and don’t compete directly, they can share ideas openly and candidly. “You’re talking to people halfway across the country, in completely different markets,” he says. “There’s no competitive tension. You can throw ideas—or even numbers—around and get real feedback.”

That national perspective often exposes independents to alternative approaches shaped by local realities too. “People in Newfoundland or Western Canada may go to market very differently than we do,” notes Dean. “Sometimes those differences are refreshing, and they make you look at your own business differently.”

Dean also underscores the importance of face-to-face connection in an industry defined by complexity. While digital tools play a role, he believes in-person meetings remain essential. “Nothing in grocery is simple,” he says. “Strong, long-term relationships—with vendors and with each other—are what actually make things happen.”

Those same themes—access, trust and shared experience—also resonate with Rick Rabba, President of the family-run chain of convenience/grocery stores, Rabba Fine Foods, a DCI member since 1997.

“The buying power, the ability to negotiate as a national buying group...it really gives independent retailers a much stronger voice than they would otherwise have,” says Rabba who has served on DCI’s board.

Perhaps less tangible but just as crucial, he adds, is the benefit of being part of a national independent network where peers can share their challenges. “You get to learn so many things you might not have otherwise known...and you can bring these back to your own business and share with your team,” he says. “Some of the opportunities and challenges that exist in working with a family business are the same no matter what part of the country you’re from.”

He says it’s not surprising then that this shared experience creates a sense of connection among members—one rooted in serving communities in different ways while navigating many of the same operational pressures.

## Embracing technology without jeopardizing connection

Technology has become an increasingly important focus for DCI over the years, particularly as digital tools become more accessible to smaller operators. “Technology used to come with a very high cost of entry,” says Lanteigne. “Now, with software-as-a-service models [which reduce upfront technology costs], it has become much more attainable for independents.”



*Sharpe’s Food Market, Campbellford, Ontario*



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DCI has worked to connect members with e-commerce platforms and digital solutions that help them compete more effectively, while also supporting shifts in marketing strategy. "As print costs have risen, digital and retail media have become more targeted and measurable," Lanteigne says. "That's especially important for independents."

Yet even with these advances, both Lanteigne and Sharpe stress the importance of relationships as fundamental to the success of independent grocers. During periods of disruption—most notably throughout the recent pandemic—members stayed in close contact, sharing information, comparing approaches and adapting as conditions changed.

That collaborative mindset has continued, with members using the organization as a forum to discuss common challenges, explore new opportunities and exchange ideas across regions via technology and in-person.

This emphasis on personal connection is reflected in DCI's annual Business Summit and charity golf tournament. Held each June in conjunction with the Canadian Independent Grocery Buyers Alliance, the summit brings together members and supplier partners for learning, discussion and structured networking. A key feature is a speed-networking format that allows participants to quickly assess fit and explore opportunities.

Participation has grown steadily in recent years, reflecting DCI's expanding footprint and relevance. For grocers, the event offers a concentrated opportunity to step away from daily operations, learn about new programs and products, and connect with peers.

That emphasis on connection carries through year-round. Lanteigne also visits member stores across the country regularly to stay in tune to evolving needs and realities in the workplace. "Being present is how we stay relevant," he says.

### **Independence with staying power**

This kind of mindset resonates with grocers as they navigate their own market realities. For Sharpe, independence is about proximity—to customers, to communities and to day-to-day decision-making. "Independent grocers are deeply connected to the communities they serve," he says. "That allows them to respond quickly and adapt."

That agility remains a defining advantage at a time when consumer expectations, technology and competitive pressures are evolving rapidly. It's also the quality DCI is most intent on preserving—ensuring independents gain scale and support without sacrificing the local focus that sets them apart.

As DCI marks its 45th anniversary, the emphasis remains firmly on the future. Continued membership growth, thoughtful technology adoption and deeper collaboration with supplier partners will shape the organization's next phase, while its core mission remains unchanged.

"Our journey reflects the resilience, adaptability and entrepreneurial spirit of the people we represent," says Lanteigne.

After 45 years, DCI's experience demonstrates that collaboration doesn't dilute independence—it strengthens it. In a consolidating grocery landscape, DCI offers a clear reminder that independent grocers can remain competitive, relevant and firmly rooted in the communities they serve.