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Targeting a Path to “make her life easier”

As told to Matt Alderton

In a way, **David Mirelez** has come full circle. Originally from Indiana, he grew up on a farm, purchased by his grandfather with life savings earned as a migrant worker in the Rio Grande Valley. Now, he's vice president, merchandise manager, of perishables and food service at Minneapolis-based **Target**, which in 2009 began a strategic transformation of its stores from general-merchandise meccas to one-stop grocery shops.



Going back a generation, my family was originally from Texas. My abuelo was a migrant worker. He ended up saving up enough money to buy his own farm and ended up settling in Indiana. That's where my father grew up, and where I spent my early years.

I spent part of my childhood moving around. Ultimately, we ended up settling down in Minnesota. I went to the University of Minnesota and earned a mechanical engineering degree.

When I graduated as an engineer, I was a construction manager building convenience stores and gas stations for ExxonMobil. As part of that work, I got to work closely with convenience-store operators. It was really interesting to see how they applied consumer psychology and used merchandising and visual presentation to drive sales in their stores. I decided retail was a career I wanted to explore, but engineering was not the degree that was going to get me there. So, I got my MBA to facilitate a career change.

I ended up coming out of business school and worked in consulting for a brief period, but always intended to go back to retail. I got my true start in retail working at Sears [as a business finance manager], then came to Target. I've been here for eight years.

Target is very focused on career development, and as such, you tend to move about every two years into a different role. In my eight-year career here I've had four different jobs. I started out in grocery as a buyer, became a senior buyer in grocery, then spent a brief stint in what we call merchandise planning in our housewares division.

My current job is vice president, merchandising manager, for our perishables and food service business. Target, over the past five to six years, has been focused on transforming our stores to include more fresh food to provide a more convenient shopping experience for our guests. If you think about the successful perishable food retailers out there, most have been in business for decades. Target's challenge is quickly getting up to speed in this business so that we can deliver a world-class guest experience. It's been challenging—we've had to figure out how to source, price, and promote products we've never had before—but it's also been rewarding because we've had tremendous success. Guests have absolutely responded positively to the addition of fresh food in our stores. The mom who's in our store buying her children's diapers and socks doesn't have to make a second stop to buy dinner for tonight. Now, she can buy her ground beef, her taco shells, and her tomatoes all in our store. We've successfully transformed Target into a one-stop shop for busy moms.

One of our keys to success has been working directly with farmers to get fresh produce. I often think about my grandfather and my father being in the fields picking tomatoes and cucumbers. I remember being in the fields with them when I was really, really young. It's interesting to reflect on how I am now running Target's perishable-foods business. One of the things my life experience brings me is a holistic perspective. I can empathize with the farmer and the grower. That helps me make good business decisions, and to be a businessperson with high integrity.

The best way to talk about Target is through our brand promise: “Expect more. Pay less.” Target obviously has great prices, but the second part—the “expect more” piece—is where our brand really lives. We bring extraordinary products to the guest, as well as low prices. If I were to translate that into my business, it goes back to the story about the busy mom. Because our store is a one-stop shop, we make her life easier. But, we also have exciting, interesting products that resonate with her. One of our focuses in grocery, for example, has been healthier, better-for-you options, such as hormone-free beef and organic produce.

It's been fun to see, over the last eight years, how Target's affinity with the Hispanic community has grown. Latinos love Target. One of the things that's happened over the past eight years is we've become really focused on creating better [product] assortments for the Latino guest. An example of that has been food. The Hispanic mom has the same time-starved pressures as any other guest, but when I started at Target we weren't necessarily fulfilling her needs. So we went through some pretty significant transformational changes at our stores in places like Texas and California to ensure we were bringing in products that appeal to guests in those areas. That was something I led when I came to Target, and our Latino guests absolutely love it.

One of the things I'm particularly proud of is Target's involvement with the National Society of Hispanic MBAs (NSHMBA); we are a signature sponsor of NSHMBA. If I look back at my career, I wouldn't be where I am today without having gone back to business school to get my MBA, but that's not a common path for many in the Hispanic community. My work at NSHMBA, as well as Target's sponsorship of it, helps us open up that opportunity to young Hispanic executives.

Mentoring aspiring Hispanic executives is probably the single biggest thing I do. What I tell young people I mentor is: the first and most important thing to be successful is finding your passion in life. It doesn't matter what you do; if you find what you're passionate about, you'll be successful. I'm really fortunate that I discovered something I love to do and a company I love to work for. That's made all the difference in my career. Without that, it's hard to reach your maximum potential.

If I were to think about what's next for me, continuing to evolve our Hispanic assortments will be a major focus of mine, from a professional as well as a personal perspective. What I also aspire to do is continue to grow and develop future leaders. We have tremendous leaders at Target, so one of my responsibilities is continuing to grow and develop our pipeline of great future leaders—and hopefully many Latino future leaders, as well.



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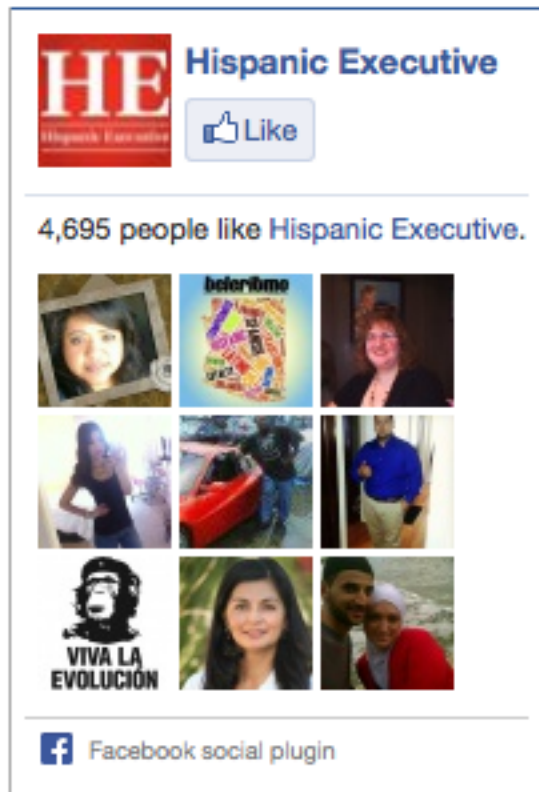
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