# NIQ Perspectives

*Food & Beverage*

February 4, 2026

# Is convenience now a trade-off?

## Implications for the Convenience Channel

*"Convenience is shedding its vice-based past: as price fatigue bites, label literacy surges, EVs curb pump trips, and GLP-1 reshapes appetites, shoppers now define value as wellness, credibility, and time well spent. The future belongs to retailers who turn quick stops into trusted health-and-habit hubs—transparent ingredients, Better-For assortments, elevated prepared food, and experiences that reward purposeful dwell. Design for intention over impulse, and convenience becomes the most accessible front door to everyday vitality."*

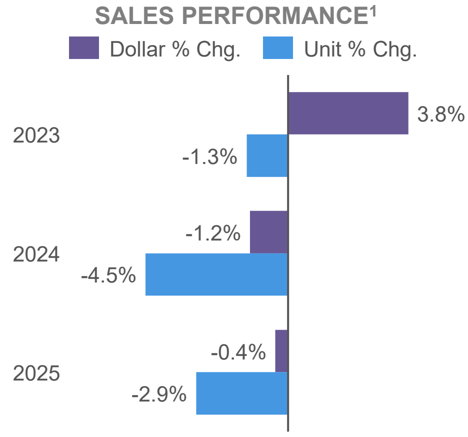

**Chris Costagli**

**Vice President, Thought Leadership F&B Insights Lead, NielsenIQ**

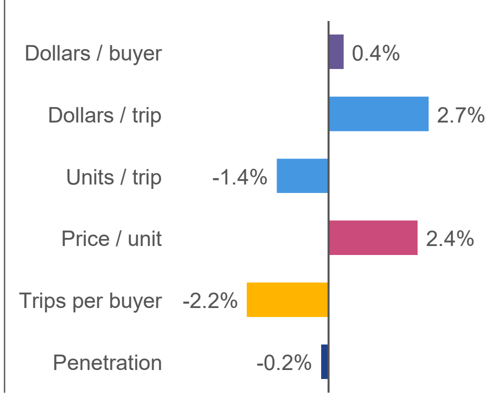

### Convenience is facing a demand problem

In 2025, the convenience channel contracted in both dollars and units while prices climbed—a structurally unhealthy mix that signals weakening demand, not temporary disruption. The convenience channel is facing a demand problem. To reverse course, retailers must re-earn trips by resetting the value equation—putting the right products, at the right prices, around the right shopper missions back at the center of the model.

CONVENIENCE CHANNEL SALES PERFORMANCE[1]



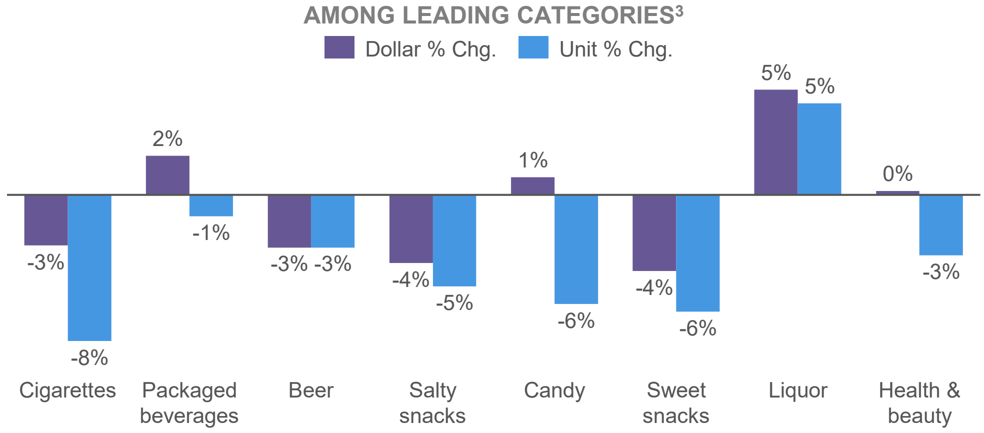

CONVENIENCE CHANNEL PURCHASE TRENDS[2]




### The vice engine is losing horsepower

Over 90% of C-store CPG dollars sit in three departments—tobacco & alternatives, grocery, and alcohol—yet the core is weakening[3]. Liquor stands alone as the only top category growing in both dollars and units, while alcohol participation hits record lows and cigarette usage continues to slide. The next chapter of convenience growth will not be about defending vices—it will be about engineering entirely new reasons to visit.

CONVENIENCE CHANNEL SALES PERFORMANCE AMONG LEADING CATEGORIES[3]




## Did you know…

- Hispanic shoppers are **2.0x more likely** to be shopping the convenience channel less because they stopped consuming alcohol?[8]
- Gen X shoppers are **1.3x more likely** to have significantly reduced the number of times they shop in the convenience channel?[8]
- Upper income shoppers are **1.2x more likely** to be shopping the convenience channel less because they are actively avoiding impulse purchases?[8]

Industry Analysis Sources: [1]NIQ, Retail Measurement Services, NACS, Total Store Excl. C-Store Prepared, Total US Convenience; [2]NIQ, Expanded Omnishopper Panel On Demand, Total Store, Total US Convenience 52 Weeks Ending 11/29/2025; [3]NIQ, Retail Measurement Services, NACS, Total Store Excl. C-Store Prepared, Total US Convenience, 52-Weeks Ending 12/27/2025; [4]NIQ, Retail Measurement Services, Powered By Label Insights, Total Convenience, Total Food & Beverage; [5]NIQ, Consumer Life Global 2024; [6]NIQ, Retail Pulse, Convenience Stores Choice Drivers, Product Category Influence, 2025; [7]NIQ, Retail Measurement Services, NACS, Total US Convenience, Food Service + Dispensed Beverages + Commissary, 52-Weeks Ending 12/27/2025; [8]NIQ, BASES Quick Question Omnibus Survey, n=2,006, January 2026; [9]NIQ, Mid-Year Consumer Outlook, 2025


Author: Chris Costagli, Vice President, Thought Leadership, Food & Beverage Insights Lead; Maria Camila Garnica, Industry Analyst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## The takeaway…

- In a world where shoppers are willing to detour for the right products, assortment advantage becomes a strategic lever for building market share.
- Speed is no longer enough to justify a premium. Today value is defined by balance, productivity, and confidence in choice—forcing c-stores to deliver experiences that feel worth the stop, not just fast.
- Prepared food and beverages are the channel's clearest path to longer, more valuable visits, yet outdated perceptions continue to cap their impact.

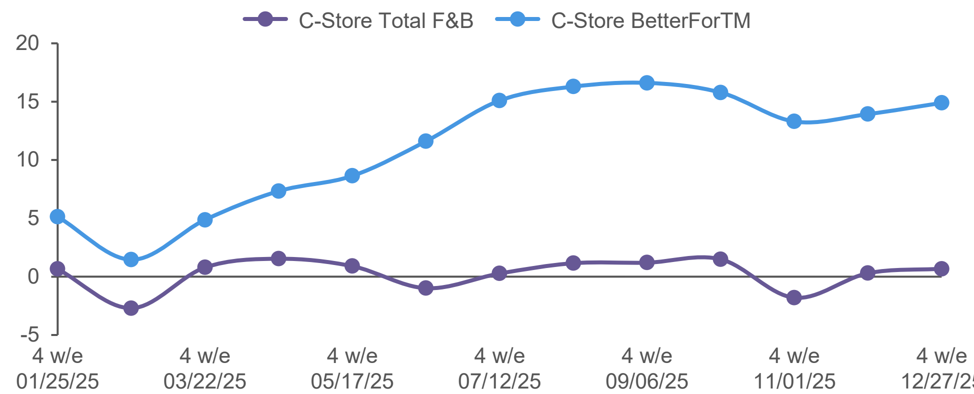
## Your next move…

- Fix hidden gaps. Fiber claims are underperforming in C-stores and under-distributed, even though fiber is relevant to the general population as well as health-driven cohorts like GLP-1 shoppers.
- Create SKUs explicitly designed for C-store missions (single-serve, functional, low-friction) with claims that are already winning (e.g., protein, no artificial colors, gluten free)
- Treat prepared like a brand launch, not a department. Move from "available" to "famous": signature items, daypart hooks (coffee + breakfast; late-night), and marketing that explicitly attacks the perception gap.

### Support wellness, not just what fits in a cupholder

BetterFor™ is outperforming in C-stores, with double-digit growth and above-average gains in claims like protein, gluten-free, and no artificial colors. Shoppers are clearly signaling what they value—but the channel is only partially meeting that demand, with key attributes under-represented. Wellness is a backbone, not a niche set of SKUs. For C-stores, this marks an inflection point to evolve from vice-based to wellness-led convenience.

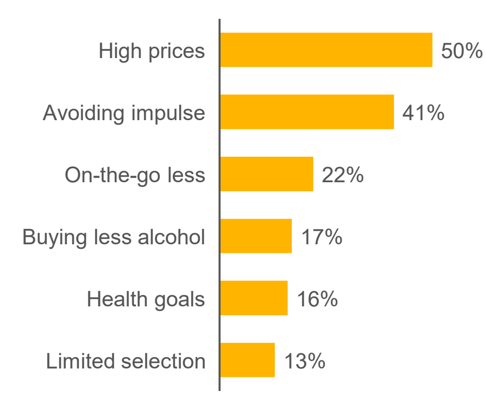
**CONVENIENCE CHANNEL FOOD & BEVERAGE DOLLAR SALES % CHANGE[4]**




### Trips collapse when "convenience" just feels expensive

Trips per buyer are down 2.2%[2] and 33% of shoppers say they're visiting less[8]—driven by structural forces like less alcohol and fewer cigarettes, plus EV adoption eroding pump-driven visits. But the #1 trip killer is blunt: price—50% say they are shopping C-stores less because prices are higher than other retailers[8]. This has converted the convenience channel from a shortcut into a trade-off where the channel now competes on justification.

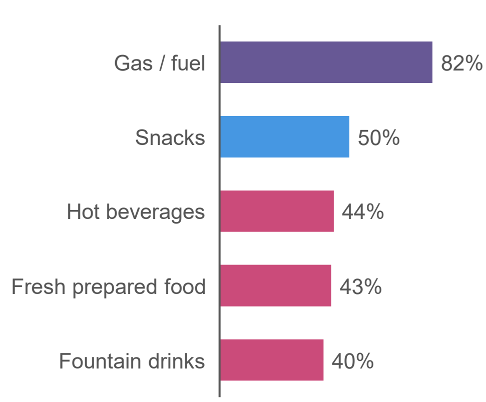
**REASONS FOR SHOPPING IN THE CONVENIENCE CHANNEL LESS OFTEN[7]**



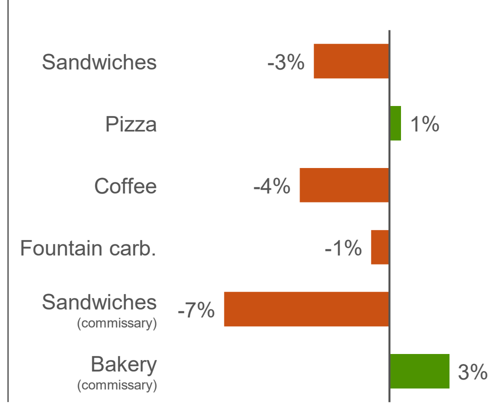

### Prepared food and beverage is big business, but there is work to be done

Prepared items generate more than $19Bn annually for convenience, yet sales declined 2% last year—highlighting a relevance gap, not a scale problem[3]. While 37% plan to cut back on away-from-home food[9], the growth path is clear: shoppers increasing C-store visits point to prepared food (15%), specialty coffee (13%), and dispensed beverages (12%)[8]. Capitalize on where quick-serve restaurants (QSR) are falling short to elevate convenience.

**CONVENIENCE CHANNEL STORE CHOICE DRIVERS[6]**




**CONVENIENCE CHANNEL PREPARED FOOD & BEVERAGE SALES[7]**




## Questions?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*Brands and retailers that keep optimizing the old playbook—cigarettes, beer, impulse—will find themselves "winning" a shrinking game as alcohol consumption hits new lows and nicotine behavior shifts. The convenience winners won't be the operators with the most stores—they'll be the ones who manufacture reasons to return. The new growth engine is a three-part stack—trust (ingredient transparency), relevance (assortment that earns detours), and dwell (prepared + beverage experiences that compete with QSR).*

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