What C-Store Beverage Shoppers Really Reach For

The prevailing narrative says shoppers everywhere are chasing better-for-you (BFY) options. In convenience retail, that's only part of the story.

C-store shoppers value healthier choices — but only some of the time. Results from a 2025 survey of Acosta Group's proprietary Shopper Community show that 63% seek healthy ingredients or better-for-you beverages at least occasionally, with categories like protein drinks, hydration beverages, and sparkling prebiotic sodas getting attention. Still, this interest is situational, not constant, which means it rarely outweighs the high-velocity items that keep limited shelf space profitable.

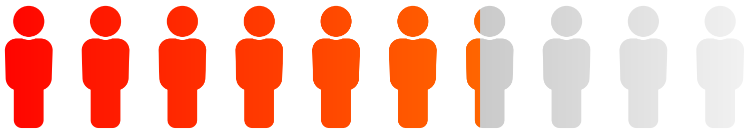
> **We're focused on building beverage portfolios that are sustainable to implement, profitable, and craveable. It's not about chasing every trend. It's about delivering retailers the products that sell consistently.**
>
> *Hobie Walker, SVP, Small Format, Acosta*

These emerging categories are worth watching, but the sweeping health trends driving grocery headlines don't always translate to convenience.

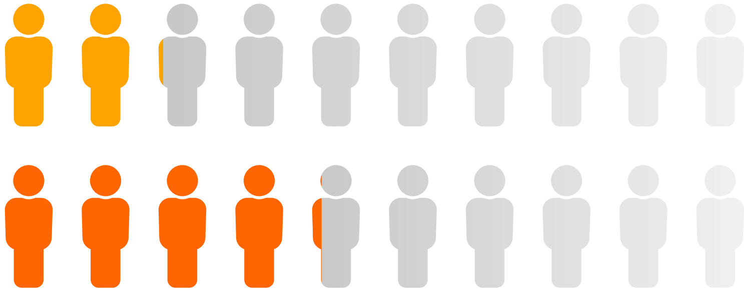
That reality explains why many natural, organic, and cannabis beverage brands — despite strong traction in health-focused retail — struggle to break into c-stores. Limited shelf space and a shopper mindset rooted in immediacy mean innovation has to prove incremental sales and staying power. In this channel, taste, portability, and instant appeal often outweigh ingredient purity or health claims.

> **We've seen strong performance in the Enhanced Water and Energy categories, especially in Florida. However, the ongoing changes in the wellness SKU assortment have created some confusion.**
>
> *Mary Velenza, Beverage Category Manager, Gate Petroleum*

Selective Demand: What the Shopper Data Tells Us



63% of c-store beverage shoppers ***are looking for BFY options***



21% always or often do

42% sometimes do

Of 14 health-oriented beverage types, ***only protein drinks and sparkling prebiotic sodas*** are consumed by a majority for health benefits.

33%+

Over 33% associate protein drinks, hydration beverages, and powdered hydration electrolyte mix-ins with health benefits — significantly more than non-c-store beverage buyers.

Cutting Back:

Alcohol and energy drinks are the beverages most often reduced or avoided for health reasons.

Craving More:

Shoppers' top better-for-you picks are high-protein drinks, sparkling prebiotic sodas, juices, and smoothies.

Source: Acosta Group Shopper Community, July-August 2025

Looking ahead, I expect to see continued innovation in flavor and further expansion of reduced and zero-sugar offerings. Brands that successfully incorporate functionality and clean ingredients are poised to win in the long term.

Jacob Jordan, Category Insight Manager, McLane

Practical Implications for Brands and Retailers

Turning shopper insights into action means focusing on what works in the c-store environment — not just what's trending elsewhere.

FOR BRANDS

Play to Proven Strengths

- Lead with high-protein claims and tap into the health halo of electrolytes, prebiotics, muscle recovery, and mental clarity.
- Simplify portfolios to improve shelf execution and reduce shopper confusion.
- Offer smaller formats for trial and bundle with prepared foods, bars, or snacks to grow the total basket.
- Plan for peak "beverage season" moments with limited-edition flavors that drive repeat trips and impulse buys.
- Leverage loyalty programs and apps to deliver personalized offers — c-store shoppers are highly promo-sensitive.

FOR RETAILERS

Make Healthy Easy to Spot

- Use signage to highlight on-the-go performance and create impulse zones for wellness-oriented beverages. Functional drinks that are easy to find, clearly messaged, and paired with offers convert far better than niche wellness SKUs buried in the cooler.
- Balance indulgence with better-for-you alternatives to serve both core and emerging shopper segments.
- Partner with distributors to fine-tune planograms and ensure flawless shelf execution.

Regional Flavor: Cult Followings and Local Preferences

Cult-favorite chains like Wawa and Buc-ee's show that destination-worthy experiences and signature items drive repeat visits more than health claims alone. Wawa's coffee culture and made-to-order hoagies create a natural pairing opportunity for smoothies, juices, and functional teas. Buc-ee's massive footprint and snack-forward model support indulgent beverages and oversized formats.

For brands, this means aligning with each retailer's known trip missions and regional preferences, not just national trends.

In the convenience channel, shopper attention is fleeting. Without clear velocity and relevance to the trip mission, even well-intentioned products struggle to earn — and keep — their place on the shelf.

Retailers and brands that focus on strategic fundamentals, optimize shelf execution, and meet shoppers exactly where they are will lead the next chapter of growth in convenience retail.

> **Success in c-store beverages isn't defined by endless innovation. It's about executing with nuance and precision: delivering products that meet shoppers' immediate needs, merchandising with intention, and aligning innovation with what actually sells.**
>
> *Hobie Walker, SVP, Small Format, Acosta*

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