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Beer Pricing Pressure Frames 2026 Sales Trends

NIQ data shows beer price inflation is squeezing consumers, but they continue to buy premium brands in c-stores.

By Convenience.org

At the start of 2026, beer pricing was, in the words of Kaleigh Theriault, beverage-alcohol thought leader at NIQ, “a little bit all over the board.”

Beer prices started the year off under pressure as inflation hit the category. NIQ off-premise data as of January showed average beer case prices rose +8.1% since the beginning of 2023, partially resulting in a -9% decline in volume during that period. Retail price upticks did slow in 2025 compared to 2024, but the residual effects of increases over the past few years continue to plague consumers and beer brands.

Beer pricing has been an industry pressure point dating back at least three years, Theriault said, particularly when viewed through the lens of overall inflation during that period. For consumers, this means a squeeze in the beer aisle. Not only do brands potentially look more expensive than they used to, but seemingly everything else in their shopping basket costs more, too. Shoppers are now approaching the category differently, and placing more emphasis on pack sizes or opting for single servings.

Theriault said price is a “core headwind” for beer in 2026. Value is increasingly important to shoppers, but in the beer context, value doesn’t just mean low prices. It means a high-quality product in a convenient format and location at the right price.

In terms of beer pricing, what are you watching out for in 2026?

Theriault: The idea of price pack architecture is really important within the industry. Sometimes we get stuck thinking only of average shelf price within a subsegment without putting it into context of the sub-segments around it. What does the pricing gap look like between some of these segments and sizes? Is a six-pack of domestic below-premium pushing up too close to domestic premium, or is it keeping a good gap?

What impact do Ready-to-Drink (RTD) beverages have on popular pack sizes and consumer shopping habits?

Theriault: RTDs are influencing how people shop other products. This is true across beer, wine and spirits. A person might have previously purchased a 12-pack of beer or a 750 ml bottle of a spirit, but now they’re buying their 12-pack of RTDs and they only need a six-pack of beer or a 375 ml of a spirit. Or maybe they’re just looking to buy the smaller 50 ml

shooters to complement the RTDs. I think we’re really seeing the influence of RTDs from a purchasing behavior standpoint affecting pack sizing in other categories.

Those smaller sizes—like single beers for example—might cost more per ounce, but they require less cash at that moment from a shopper who might be on a budget. How is this behavior impacting the category?

Theriault: We do see that when somebody is buying a smaller size spirit for example, sometimes it’s because it’s a value play and they’re not able to afford a 750 ml at that moment. That’s happening. Inflation has hit a lot of consumers. The other side of it, though, is that we see somebody buying a more premium product in that smaller size because they’re going to drink it on the rocks and need it to taste really good. So they’re premiumizing there, because when they want a mixed product, they’re going with that seltzer or that canned cocktail.

What are the pricing trends for single-serve beer in convenience stores versus grocery and liquor channels?

Theriault: Convenience drove up single-size prices across all types of beer last year, which is interesting to see, because they haven’t raised prices on six-packs or 12-packs as much as singles. Craft beer single prices have risen the most (+2.7%), followed by super-premium (+1.9%). In the grocery channel, we also saw an increase in price on single-serve offerings, with super-premium (+3.8%) and domestic premium (+2.2%) leading the way. And then the liquor channel has really taken up price on six-packs, interestingly.

Consumers are increasingly squeezed by the rising cost of food and other necessities. What does that mean for the durability of the trend toward premiumization in alcohol?

Theriault: Alcohol still tends to be that aspirational product for many people. Maybe they’re moderating their consumption but when they do choose to drink, they’re still going to go for a higher-end product. So though we’re in this declining market, we still see those premium brands and products finding their place. The “split-brain budget” is also a factor. The joke is that someone is shopping at the dollar store in Gucci shoes, so it’s the idea that people will look for areas where they can cut back on their purchasing. So they might be buying store-brand paper towels, but then they’re still going to continue to buy other premium products, like alcohol. ■



WSJ: Will Coffee Prices Come Down Soon?

From tariffs to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, WSJ looks at why there has been a rise in commodity coffee prices.

By *Convenience.org*

There are now several factors at play driving up the cost of coffee, including tariffs, crop failures, rising labor costs and concerns around the war in Iran, wrote The Wall Street Journal in a piece detailing how all of these costs have added up over time. Experts say prices likely won't come down anytime soon.

“Extreme weather, including droughts in Brazil and Vietnam, [have] hit coffee crops. And even before any tariff increases, hedge-fund bets anticipating the levies were pushing commodity prices higher. Then in July, President Trump slapped an additional 40% tariff on goods from Brazil, which produces more than a third of the world’s coffee, citing legal action against its former President Jair Bolsonaro and U.S. tech firms as justification,” WSJ said.

This led to coffee shops across the country raising the price of retail coffee as many coffee sellers passed on costs to customers. Coffee outpaced other grocery items in the inflation-tracking consumer-price index last year, according to the report.

Coffee commodity prices then began sliding again in November after Trump pulled back the 40% tariff on Brazilian food items, including coffee.

“Another reason commodity prices are surging again? The same speculative trading that contributed to price surges

early last year is ramping up again. Back then, traders piled into coffee contracts—betting the price would go up—after an Agriculture Department report warned of a coffee-supply shortage. By February 2025, hedge funds controlled about a third of all coffee contracts—a \$10.4 billion bet that helped fuel a surge in the C-price,” WSJ wrote.

As a result, commodity prices have “just been roller coaster stupid,” said Emory University professor Peter Roberts, who developed the Specialty Coffee Retail Price Index. The index tracks prices for roasted coffee sold by about 60 companies in North America, including Starbucks, Stumptown and Peet’s. “Hedge funds are just liking the gamed uncertainty.”

Meanwhile, hedge funds sold off a “big chunk of their positions early in 2026 after Brazilian authorities said they expected a record year in coffee production. Now, surging fuel and freight costs caused by the closure of the Strait of Hormuz have triggered a new round of coffee-contract purchases and rise in commodity coffee prices.”

Hot dispensed beverages generated 8.4% of c-store foodservice sales, a slight decrease from 8.5% in 2023, according to the NACS State of the Industry Report® of 2024 Data. Read more about hot dispensed beverage sales in the September 2025 issue of NACS Magazine feature “Big Business (Still) at the Beverage Bar.” ■

Strategic Moves for Small Operators

Independents are playing a different game than the biggest retailers—but smart maneuvers aren't about size.

By *NACSMagazine.com*

Every morning at 4:22 a.m., the bell rings for the shift change at a Beverly, Ohio, factory. Employees at the nearby Corner Store & Drive Thru are ready. They've been on the clock since the convenience store opened at 4 a.m. Those on their way into work grab breakfast and a deli sandwich for their lunch break while hot meals are ready for hungry workers going home for the day.

"We are the earliest doors open. We open before the local McDonald's," said Rachel Eickert, owner at Corner Store Corp., the convenience store that her mother operated for almost 20 years before Eickert took over.

It's a picture-perfect snapshot of what's at the heart of being an independent retailer—knowing the unique needs of your customers and serving the community with pride.

Family-owned Glassmere Fuel Service operates three convenience stores in Western Pennsylvania, where it competes with "big name competitors" in the region, said Kellen Cromie, marketing director at Glassmere. "We have a lot of respect for those companies, and they're ones we want to emulate. But we're a smaller operator so we do think very differently."

Being small in store count doesn't mean retailers have to stand in the shadow of multi-unit operators. Independents have their own advantages, while technology tools that were once inaccessible are now within reach.

Level Up With Loyalty

A critical foundation of retail success is communicating with your customers, said Ernie Harker of Ignite Retail Technology. "You need to keep in front of [your customers]. Loyalty programs are awesome for promotions but also marketing and connection. Small operators now can easily get white label apps or single kiosks for inputting a phone number."

Glassmere has its own loyalty app, which quickly became popular with its customers. The company started looking into the idea four years ago, and at the time went with a lower-cost option. "It was lower end but it still gained a lot of traction. It looked good, functioned well and we had a lot of initial investment in it. People were happy," Cromie explained. Glassmere switched later to a new provider, but the lesson is clear—start somewhere.

"Something like [a loyalty app] isn't out of reach anymore. Five years ago, that would have been far too expensive and involved for a small operator like myself. It would have cost tens of thousands of dollars," he said.

Between Glassmere's three locations, Cromie said the investment more than pays for itself in cigarette rebates alone. "People who are using the app really take advantage of those kinds of things. I've seen at least a 5-6% increase in my cigarette rebates just because they're using those two-pack deals that I didn't have previously."

And that's with only 30% of his customers using the digital app. The other 70%, he said, still use a physical card.

At Corner Store, the company also taps into more analog, but successful, loyalty methods—a text club run by a cigarette manufacturer alerting customers to promotions or discounts, and stamp cards for its foodservice.

"We do a buy 10 breakfasts or lunches and get one free stamp card. We allow stamps for as many items as there are per transaction, so if they buy four sandwiches, then they get four stamps," said Eickert. "People fill up the stamp cards really quickly, but it increases how much they buy, and it also really increases the overall ticket size."

Cutting-Edge Moves

As a small retailer, Cromie is always looking for "that little extra edge." What he means by that, he said, is finding incremental ways that he can enhance store operations while saving costs.

Glassmere uses LED TV screens in its stores to display promotions, digital pump screens through DX Promote to highlight specials while customers are fueling, and AI voice messaging over the speakers inside and outside to reinforce deals. "These are all simple, affordable tools that make us look and act like a much bigger chain," Cromie noted.

The screens also help with his marketing and product sales, too.

"We are big boots-on-the-ground people. With my in-store screens, it's important that I'm getting all my messages across for people when they're actually at the store," he said. With regulars making up more than half of his customer

base, he said getting them to the store isn't where he focuses his marketing efforts. Instead, he focuses on driving promotions during the shopping moment.

"I've got my indoor TVs running ads on scheduled rotations, and ads at the pump. Through our vendor I can run whatever I want, which allows me to do things like sell the airtime. We also added overhead messaging systems with music programs. I've seen a lot of success with that. It's always nice to walk into your store and see someone whistling along to the music," he said.

At the same time, he emphasized that manual methods still work. "I still print out physical signs. Out in the community, if I'm running a big gasoline special next month, I call someone down at the municipal building and say, 'Hey, we're going to be doing this, can you let everyone know? Here's a flyer.'"

Play the Position

One thing independents don't have: red tape. "My wholesaler and I have each other on speed dial. One of the biggest benefits we have is just the speed and flexibility of being able to get new products in and test them out," said Cromie. He said that he likes to "get in front of fun TikTok trends" or experiment with new products.

Vendor relationships are critical, he said, and who you choose to partner with matters. "Even with a small footprint, I still want that attention from my wholesaler. I like small vendors. I like local vendors. People notice that around here in Western Pennsylvania. Local is good."

Staying on trend is not easy 100% of the time, said Eickert. "Just this week, there was a new flavor from a big energy brand that came out. I won't be able to get it in for about a week or two, but our local Family Dollar is selling it. Family Dollar can create contracts to get that product a month earlier than what we can do. That's a challenge."

Corner Store's municipality also only has two liquor licenses, which Eickert said were given to two chain gas stations in the area, boxing Corner Store out of the category. So, the store has leaned heavily into its beer selection. "We are outselling Walmarts and Krogers," she said.

Expanding Your Repertoire

While smaller operators may not have the latest and flashiest tech displayed in store or the most expensive software systems, there are plenty of programs that retailers can use to make their day more efficient, said Cromie.

Social media is "free advertisement unless you want to boost the post, and even then it's very affordable," said Eickert. "It gets your name out there, and you can run your own deals and specials that are customized, such as for busy or slow days of the week."

A Local Game Plan

"The absolute best thing you can do for your brand is to get

involved with your community. This is where independents absolutely shine," Cromie said. He said Glassmere tries to do "basically everything we can, whether it's donations, sponsorship or even just showing up." Glassmere also helps others in the community with their local efforts. "If someone is doing a fundraiser, we'll hang up their flyer. If they're selling tickets to something, we'll buy some and sell them to our customers," he said.

Corner Store is close to two schools. The business supports them as much as possible. "Whenever the parents of the students see you inside of the yearbook or on the billboards at the games, they see you as a destination that cares about their children," said Eickert.

"It's important for small businesses to do the little things like that," said Cromie. "It's not just getting your name out there. It shows [local customers] 'Here's where your dollar is going when you spend it at Glassmere.'"

Conversations Go a Long Way

With limited footprints, Glassmere Fuel Service locations don't have the ability to have made-to-order foodservice programs, said Kellen Cromie, marketing director at Glassmere. "So it's really important that we're talking to our customers every day. We ask them, 'What do you want to see this week? What are you hungry for? What can we order?'" We're always trying to mix things up with the food that we're bringing in and personalizing it to our customers. This keeps my regulars happy, and it also means I'm reducing waste [in inventory]."

Cromie keeps sheets at the front of the store where customers can write down product suggestions. "We might also ask them if they would be interested if we brought a specific item in at a certain price. We have customers who are really engaged in this way simply because of the fact that we are a small store."

Find Your Lane

In Beverly, Ohio, Corner Store is the only drive-thru convenience store within a 50-mile radius, said Rachel Eickert, owner at Corner Store Corp.

"This really sets us apart from our competitors. Customers can get whatever they want out of it—beer, cigarettes, candy, foodservice, lottery. It's a full-service drive-thru window," she said. "It's a really helpful option for mothers with children who don't want to get them out of the car, or the elderly, or if it's a cold day and a customer just doesn't want to come inside."

Corner Store also pays attention to the details and has added thoughtful touches to its drive-thru experience. "We have suckers ready for the kids, and dog treats—the customers really love those," she said. "Customers really just want the accessibility of the drive thru that also gives them all the options they're looking for. They want in-and-out service but also the whole choice of offerings." ■