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BACK TO SCHOOL BACK TO BUSINESS

FEATURE INSIDE

Turning Morning Traffic
into Opportunity



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7 Actionables to Spark Snack Sales for Small Operators

"For convenience stores, the advantage isn't scale, it's immediacy and influence at the moment of decision," Circana's Sally Lyons Wyatt says.

By CSPDailyNews.com

Convenience-store operators at all levels—the largest chain to single-store owner—are tasked with adding excitement around their packaged snack portfolios to spark impulse and planned purchases.

Single-store owners have a lot at stake to boost the packaged snack offer and less wiggle room to squander

opportunities. The right moves are vital as nonchannel competitors such as e-commerce, social media giants like TikTok and brick-and-mortar mass merchandisers are finding their sweet spot with snack merchandising.

All are providing customers with the right blend of multiple package formats, value, innovation and integration of smaller, regional brands into store sets.

Rebecca Gregory, center store category manager for Weigel's, a Powell, Tennessee-based chain of 89 stores, told CSP that retailers large and small must work to introduce "something different to the shelf," and cited Mingua Beef Jerky as "a clear example. It has brought and it has become one of the most successful impulse-driven jerky brands we've added. We look forward to the next Mingua as the year progresses."

Sally Lyons Wyatt, global executive vice president and chief advisor of consumer goods and foodservice insights for Chicago-based Circana, talked to CSP and offered several suggestions for independent retailers to curate a more precise, fluid in-store snack planogram.

The suggestions are:

Shift your approach. With much at stake, smaller independent operators should shift from organizing snacks as “salty,” “sweet” or “bars” to organizing “around missions such as energy, indulgence, meal replacement—including protein drinks—or reward,” Wyatt said. “Snacking has become much more intentional, and shoppers are looking to solve for a moment. When items are grouped accordingly, it simplifies the decision and increases basket size.”

Foster impulse buying. “For convenience stores, the advantage isn’t scale, it’s immediacy and influence at the moment of decision,” Wyatt said. “The biggest opportunity is to merchandise around how consumers actually snack today, which is by need and not by category.”

Break down category/segment barriers. Small operators should think of snacks “as part of a broader food and beverage ecosystem,” Wyatt said. The lines between snacks, meals and beverages continue to blur—and the stores that win will be those that merchandise accordingly, meaning meeting consumers across multiple moments, not just a single category. “The opportunity here is to curate the snacking occasion in real time, making it easy, immediate and compelling to say ‘yes.’”

Leverage adjacency and bundling. “We know beverage and snacks are highly connected and, increasingly, beverages themselves are part of the snacking occasion,” Wyatt said. “Pairing snacks with beverages, protein or even functional items creates a more complete solution and reinforces the role of the store as a one-stop snack destination, not just a quick grab.”



Focus on high-impact zones. In a channel driven by immediacy, what a shopper sees quickly matters more than total assortment. “That means prioritizing innovation, high-velocity items and premium offerings in front-of-store, checkout and beverage-adjacent placements to drive trial and impulse,” she said.

Balance value and discovery. Consumers are still managing budgets, so entry price points, smaller formats and clear value communication are critical, Wyatt said.

Think about snack bars. It’s not just ingredients in bars; bars are a snack seen as best serving as a meal solution during all dayparts, and nutritional bars in particular have come through best (over breakfast bars, for example) by communicating transparency, Wyatt said. “Bars are regarded as an optimal snack option for pre- and post-workouts,” she said. One additional reason to accentuate snack bars: the category as a whole grew 10.3% in U.S. c-stores for a 52-week period ending May 17, 2026, according to Circana. ■



Turning Morning Traffic into Opportunity

How independent convenience retailers can capitalize on the return of daily routines by delivering speed, convenience, and a customer experience that keeps communities coming back.

As summer comes to an end and students return to the classroom, convenience stores enter one of the busiest and most important times of the year. Morning routines return almost overnight as parents head to work, students stop for breakfast, and commuters fuel up before starting their day. For independent retailers, the back-to-school season presents a valuable opportunity to strengthen customer relationships, increase sales, and position their store as a trusted part of the community.

Success during this seasonal transition begins with understanding customer habits. As daily routines become more predictable, customers are looking for convenience, speed, and reliability. Whether they're purchasing fuel, grabbing a cup of coffee, or picking up breakfast on the go, they expect a quick and seamless experience that fits into their busy schedule.



Every Morning Matters

The morning rush is more than just a busy period—it's an opportunity to make a lasting impression. Customers often spend only a few minutes inside a convenience store, making every interaction count. Stores that are prepared for increased traffic are better positioned to meet customer expectations while creating positive experiences that encourage repeat visits.

Simple operational practices can have a meaningful impact, including:

- Having fresh coffee available before peak traffic begins.
- Ensuring fuel pumps and payment systems are operating efficiently.
- Keeping breakfast items and grab-and-go beverages fully stocked.
- Scheduling staff to provide quick, friendly service during peak hours.

When operations run smoothly, customers notice.

Understanding Seasonal Demand

The back-to-school season also brings changes in purchasing behavior. Breakfast items, bottled beverages, snacks, coffee, and fuel become everyday essentials for customers on the move. Retailers who anticipate these trends and plan accordingly are better equipped to meet demand while maximizing sales opportunities.

Maintaining strong inventory levels and merchandising high-demand products in visible, convenient locations helps customers quickly find what they need. Strategic product placement can also encourage additional purchases, increasing overall basket size without requiring additional floor space.

Creating Customer Experience That Builds Loyalty

Convenience retail is about more than transactions—it's about building trust. Customers return to stores that consistently provide reliable products, efficient service, and a positive experience.

Small details make a difference. Friendly employees, efficient checkout, well-organized merchandising, and dependable product availability all contribute to a shopping experience that keeps customers coming back. Over time, those daily interactions become lasting customer relationships.

Looking Beyond the Season

While back-to-school marks the beginning of a busy period, the habits established during these weeks often continue throughout the school year. Retailers who focus on consistency, operational excellence, and customer satisfaction today are investing in long-term success.

Every busy morning presents an opportunity—not just to increase sales, but to strengthen customer loyalty and reinforce the value independent convenience stores bring to their communities.

Key Takeaways

The back-to-school season is more than a seasonal increase in traffic; it's a chance to build stronger customer relationships and create lasting business growth. By focusing on operational readiness, understanding customer needs, and delivering a dependable experience every day, retailers can turn the morning rush into a long-term advantage.



The insights presented in this article are informed by convenience retail industry research and best practices from the National Association of Convenience Stores (NACS), Circana, the National Retail Federation (NRF), NielsenIQ (NIQ), and the U.S. Census Bureau.

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