CPG Innovation Summit: Insights to Action Workshop - 2026 Consumer Predictions

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Natural Products EXPO WEST 45 YEARS

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Insights to Action Workshop

2026 Consumer Predictions

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The Opportunities Ahead

Acosta Group's 2026 Predictions

Shoppers Rely More on AI Companions, But Trust and Fragmentation Slow Full Automation 1

Informed and Transparent Wellness Choices Define 2026 2

Innovation for All: Shoppers Embrace What's Relevant, Not Who's Behind It 3

Consumers Demand Holistic Value – From Stores to Dining 4

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1

PREDICTION

Shoppers Rely More on AI Companions, But Trust and Fragmentation Slow Full Automation

Shoppers will increasingly adopt AI-supported shopping – asking for personalized recommendations and forging relationships that feel more like friendship.

Yet, most consumers still hesitate to let AI make purchases on their behalf, with trust and transparency as key obstacles. The rapid proliferation of retailer-specific AI tools will create fragmented experiences, forcing shoppers to manage multiple accounts and re-enter preferences.

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AI-Assisted Shopping is Mainstream, But Direct AI Shopping is Still Limited

The 2025 holiday shopping AI experiences were positive, with **8-in-10 Black Friday weekend** AI shoppers likely to use AI again in the future.

WHILE

70%

of shoppers have used some type of AI tool to *assist* with their shopping journey and decisions

Asking for reviews
Summarizing deals
Personalized recommendations

ONLY

2-in-10

shoppers have used Generative AI for product search

"What's the best TV under $500?"
"Where can I buy Nike shoes?"

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Sources: Acosta Group Post-Thanksgiving Weekend Study Dec 2025, Acosta Group AI Shopper Insights Study, July 2025; https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w34255/w34255.pdf

Consumer Adoption Will Accelerate When Trust is Earned

Brands and platforms that earn consumer trust will unlock the next wave of AI-driven shopping.

Only

12% of shoppers trust AI to make purchases on their behalf

(25% of Gen Z shoppers)

Key Q for 2026: Will AI's shopping mistakes or false results emerge as a growth stopper?

"The AI couldn't filter deals based on my allergies, so it kept recommending food products I can't have."
- Millennial Female, Thanksgiving Weekend Shopper

Top Concerns

Privacy and data use	60%
Unapproved purchases	56%
Fraud / scams	56%
Buying the wrong items	53%
Lack of control	49%
Spending more than I approved	48%
Not understanding my criteria / preferences	42%

Source: Acosta Group Shopper Community AI Enabled Shopping survey - June 2025; Acosta Group Hot Topics Survey Oct 2025; Acosta Group Post-Thanksgiving Weekend Survey Dec 2025; eMarketer

PREDICTION 1

Implications and Opportunities

Shoppers Rely More on AI Companions, But Trust and Fragmentation Slow Full Automation

Optimize for AI discoverability now

Invest in Answer Engine Optimization (AEO) and Generative Engine Optimization (GEO) to ensure your products surface when AI assistants make recommendations.

Partner with AI platforms early

Follow Walmart and Target's lead by integrating with ChatGPT and other AI shopping tools; brands that wait risk being excluded from influential algorithms.

Prioritize data accuracy and accessibility

Ensure product information, pricing, inventory, and store data are consistently accurate across all platforms – AI agents will penalize brands with unreliable data.

Create trust with shoppers and plan for some AI fatigue

Shoppers need transparency on how their data is stored and used and will be experimenting with fragmentated third-party apps and retailer offerings

Target Gen Z as your AI commerce proving ground

With 55% of Gen Z expressing interest in AI-enabled shopping and 53% trusting AI information more than other sources, use this cohort to test and refine strategies.

2

PREDICTION

Informed and Transparent Wellness Choices Define 2026

In 2026 shoppers will design diets around function, not fads – seeking foods that support weight management, digestion, and allergen-free living with clear labels, ingredients, and credible claims.

MAHA is driving brands to swap artificial ingredients for cleaner alternatives, and shoppers reward those who make healthy choices easy and real. Protein remains popular, but other nutrients like fiber are quickly entering the spotlight as shoppers demand more intentional and informed nutrition.

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In 2026, Shoppers Will Be More Intentional About Their Health and Wellness Choices

Functional benefits, transparency, and personalization reset expectations across every aisle.

Key Drivers:

- **Personalized Health**
  Weight management, gut health, allergen-free living
- **Transparency and Trust**
  Clean labels, credible claims, ingredient disclosure
- **Function-First**
  Protein ubiquity, fiber rise, GLP-1 ripple effect

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Source: Nielsen IQ, The New Hope Group

2 PREDICTION

Implications and Opportunities

Informed and Transparent Wellness Choices Define 2026

Reformulate proactively, not reactively

With 71% of shoppers supporting stricter ingredient regulations, get ahead of policy changes by removing artificial ingredients and clearly communicating reformulations.

Lead with functional benefits, not just "free from" claims

Shoppers want foods that actively support health goals (weight management, gut health, energy); position products around what they deliver, not just what they lack.

Prepare for the fiber moment

Fiber is growing in the social conversation 2.4x faster than protein; consider fiber-fortified innovations across categories to capture the next wave of functional nutrition demand, especially among GLP-1 users.

Embrace third-party validation

As apps like Yuka and Bobby gain influence and certifications like Non-UPF Verified launch, ensure your products can withstand ingredient scrutiny and earn credibility badges.

Meet GLP-1 users where they are

With 65%+ of GLP-1 users seeking specific nutrient profiles, develop portion-controlled, nutrient-dense options and consider partnerships with health-focused retailers.

3

PREDICTION

Innovation for All: Shoppers Embrace What's Relevant, Not Who's Behind It

In 2026, shoppers will care less about *who* is innovating and more about whether the innovation actually fits their lives.

With the democratization of innovation, shoppers discover and embrace new products from any brand, fueled by social media and influencer recommendations.
Brands that win will pay close attention — listening, learning, and adjusting fast enough to match how people really live, work, and shop today. Expect the pace of change to accelerate as shoppers demand innovation that fits their evolving realities.

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Certain Attributes Elevate Perceived Value, Prompting Shoppers' Willingness to Pay More

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Source: Acosta Group Hot Topic State of the Shopper Study, Oct 2025

Legacy is No Longer Synonymous With Quality

Innovation-fueled brands and private labels will continue driving growth – surpassing legacy players.

Challenger brands attract new audiences and inspire discovery.

Culturally relevant brands

That feel fresh are rewarded with trial and loyalty.

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Size of Manufacturer	Share of Total $ Sales	4-Year CAGR
Large (>$1BN)	52%	+3.1%
Medium ($200MM to <$1BN)	12%	+3.6%
Small ($50MM to <$200MM)	6%	+3.2%
Emerging ($10K to <$50MM)	8%	+6.7%
Private Label	22%	+6.5%

Source: NIQ

Retailers Will Raise the Bar for What Counts as Innovation

45%

Plan to increase innovation acceptance slightly to significantly in 2026

53%

Will increase flexibility to cut in new items but only for **true innovation** with marketing support

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Source: Acosta Group Retail Confidential, Fall 2025

Certain Attributes Elevate Perceived Value, Prompting Shoppers' Willingness to Pay More

Both retail and foodservice concepts will continue to push premiumization (e.g. fast-food chicken)

Source: Acosta Group Hot Topic State of the Shopper Study, Oct 2025

3

PREDICTION

Implications and Opportunities

Innovation for All: Shoppers Embrace What's Relevant, Not Who's Behind It

Prioritize relevance over novelty

Retailers will only make room for "true innovation with marketing support"; ensure new products solve real consumer problems and come with a clear go-to-market plan.

Move at the speed of culture

With insurgent brands capturing 40% of category growth, and the democratization on innovation, legacy brands must shorten innovation cycles, leverage social listening, and test-and-learn faster than traditional processes allow.

Consider strategic acquisitions or partnerships

If you can't out-innovate challengers organically, buy them or partner with them; PepsiCo / Poppi and e.l.f. / Rhode show this is becoming standard practice for legacy brands.

Invest in experiential trial

With 83% of shoppers purchasing new brands after sampling, prioritize in-store demos, immersive retail experiences, and culturally resonant activations that drive discovery.

Don't underestimate private label competition

Retailers are driving innovation through their own brands (64% plan to grow private label via innovation); national brands must clearly differentiate on attributes PL can't easily replicate.

4

PREDICTION

Consumers Demand Holistic Value – From Stores to Dining

In 2026, the intentional shopper will demand more – more relevance, more experience, more value.

Brands, retailers, and foodservice operators that truly understand their shoppers — and double down on curated offerings and seamless technology — will turn relevance and experience into total value and loyalty.

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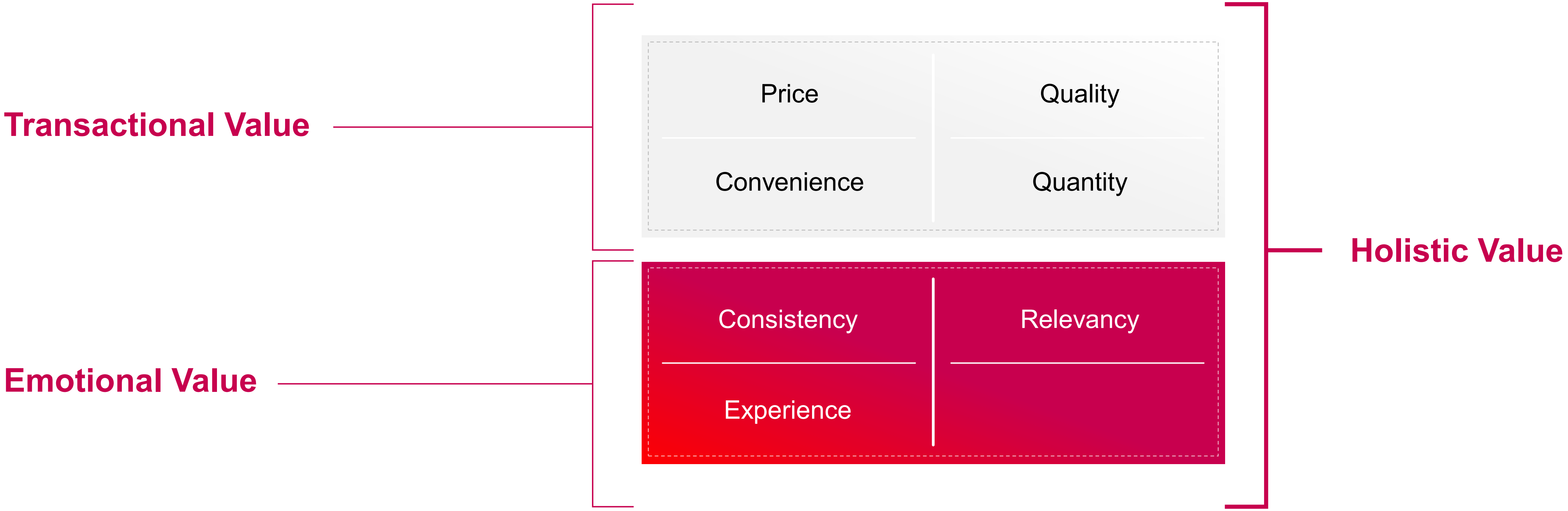
Intentional Consumption Redefines Value: From Transactional to Holistic

Shifting beyond price into purpose, emotion, and experience.



4 PREDICTION

Implications and Opportunities

Consumers demand holistic value – from stores to dining

Redefine your value proposition beyond price

Shoppers now evaluate value holistically (relevance, experience, consistency); audit every touchpoint and ensure your brand delivers emotional value, not just transactional savings.

Double down on what makes you distinctive

H-E-B's Texas identity and Erewhon's wellness curation prove that unapologetic positioning builds loyalty; identify your unique strength and amplify it rather than chasing competitors.

Evolve loyalty programs from transactional to experiential

Static points programs are giving way to tiered memberships, exclusive perks, and dynamic personalization; experiment with real-time offers and cross-promotional bundling.

Invest in frictionless technology that enhances the trip

Sam's Club's Scan & Go (35% of sales) and Lowe's AI-assisted customer service show shoppers reward brands that remove friction while adding value to the experience.

Blur the lines between retail and foodservice strategically

With 63% of consumers discovering food trends through prepared foods at grocery and c-stores, consider how your brand can participate in the convergence of shopping and dining.

Breakout #1

AI
as the
NEW SHOPPER

Breakout #2

HOLISTIC
value
STRESS TEST

BREAKOUT

AI as the New Shopper

1 **Open your favorite AI / LLM tool**

ChatGPT Gemini Copilot perplexity Ask Rufus Grok Claude

2 **As a group, choose ONE prompt.**
Enter the same prompt into several different AI agents.

3 **Capture key differences in the responses.**
Look for variation in prioritization, brand mentions, retailer bias, hallucinations, omissions

GROUP OUTPUT

- 3 observed differences
- 1 implication for brands to strengthen discoverability

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1 BREAKOUT

AI as the New Shopper

Analyze each AI's response:

- What did each AI prioritize (price, wellness, convenience, sustainability, reviews, ingredients)?
- Did it successfully personalize recommendations to match the prompt?
- Did it mention brands by name?
- Did it mention specific retailers?
- Were there any accuracy issues?

GROUP OUTPUT

- 3 observed differences
- 1 implication for brands to strengthen discoverability

BREAKOUT 2

Holistic Value Stress Test

Compare how each AI model defines holistic value.

1

As a group, choose ONE prompt.
Enter the same prompt into several different AI agents.

2

Capture key differences in the responses.
Look for variation in which value levers AI emphasized *(price, portion size, nutrition, sustainability, convenience, emotional value)*

GROUP OUTPUT

- 3 observed differences
- 1 action to strengthen brand value storytelling

2 BREAKOUT

Holistic Value Stress Test

Analyze each AI's response:

- What did each AI prioritize (price, portion size, nutrition, sustainability, convenience, emotional value)?
- What tradeoffs did AI recommend?
- Did it bias premium over budget products?
- Did it mention brands or retailers by name?
- Were there any accuracy issues?

GROUP OUTPUT

- 3 observed differences
- 1 action to strengthen brand value storytelling

Implications for You

What are you going to do in the next 30 days?

- **Audit how agentic platforms and LLMs represent your brand story.**
  Ensure AI-driven recommendations reflect the narrative and differentiation you intend.
- **Keep product data, pricing, and inventory accurate and consistent across all platforms.**
  Ensure product truth and consumer relevance everywhere agents decide.
- **Audit every touchpoint for emotional value and embed shopper and product attributes into digital content.**
  Enable agents to match the right product to the right shopper context.
- **Make sure agent-mediated experiences reinforce why your brand matters to consumers — not just what it costs.**

THANK YOU

For further information, please contact us at **acosta.group.**

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