

Redefining Retail Spaces: Lessons from the C-Store Category

Convenience stores, or c-stores, have been one of the more exciting retail categories to watch over the past few years. The segment has undergone significant shifts, embracing more diverse offerings like fresh food and expanded dining options, while also exploring new markets and adapting to changing consumer needs.

We took a closer look at how the segment is faring as Q3 2024 draws to a close.

Key Takeaways:

- Monthly **convenience store** visits have been consistently elevated year over year (YoY) since February 2024.
- Regional convenience store chains like **Wawa**, **Buc-ee's**, and **Sheetz** are expanding beyond their traditional markets, driving foot traffic with unique offerings and growing their presence in new states.
- C-store visitor behavior varies by region, with some states seeing shorter dwell times, and others, like Wyoming and Montana, experiencing significantly longer visits.
- **7-Eleven's** Free Slurpee Day drove a major increase in foot traffic this year, with visits increasing by 127.3% on July 11th, relative to a year-to-date (YTD) daily visit average.

Seasonal Stops Along The Way

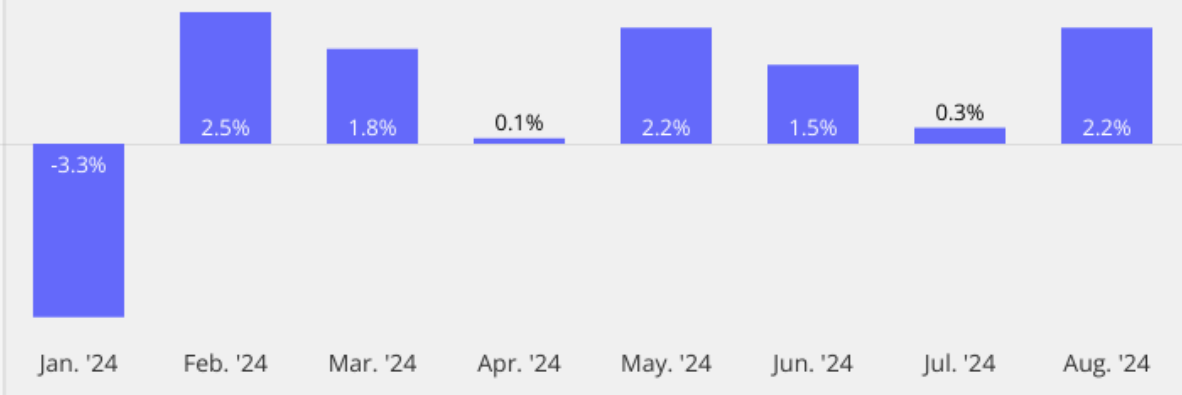
Convenience stores are increasingly viewed not only as places to fuel up, but as affordable [destinations](#) for quick meals, snacks, and other necessities. And analyzing monthly visits to the category shows that it is continuing to benefit from its positioning as a stop for food, fuel, and in some cases, tourism.

Despite lapping a [strong](#) H1 2023, visits to the category either exceeded last year's levels or held steady during all but one of the first eight months of 2024 – highlighting the segment's ongoing strength. Only in January 2024 did C-stores see a slight YoY dip, likely reflecting a weather-induced exaggeration of the segment's normal seasonality.

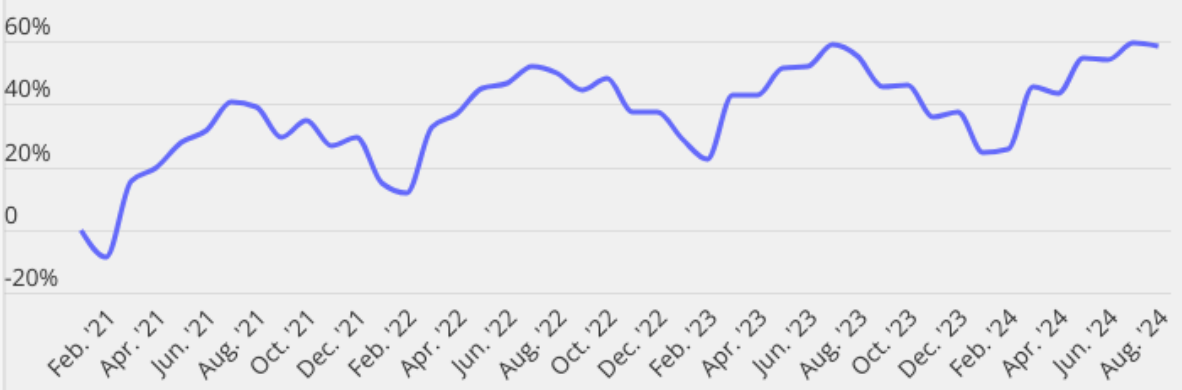
Indeed, examining monthly fluctuations in visits to c-stores (compared to a January 2021 baseline) shows that foot traffic to the category tends to peak in summer months – perhaps driven by summer road trips and vacations – and slow down significantly in winter. Given summer's importance for convenience stores, the category's August YoY visit bump is a particularly promising indication of c-stores' robust positioning this year.

Convenience Stores Enjoy Elevated Monthly Visits in 2024, Experience Consistent Seasonal Visitation Patterns

Monthly Visits Compared to 2023



Baseline Change in Monthly Visits | Compared to a Jan. 1, 2021 Baseline

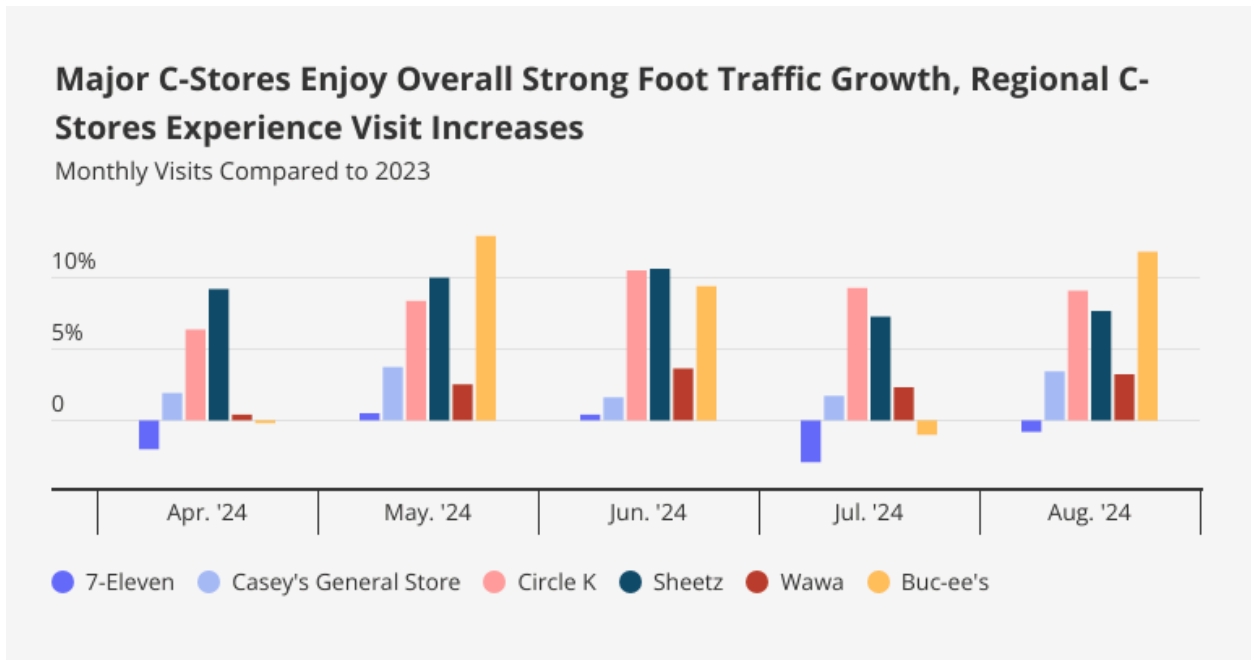


Regional Chains Expanding Their Reach

While some C-store chains, like 7-Eleven, have a nationwide presence, others are concentrated in specific areas of the country. But as the popularity of C-stores continues to grow, regional chains like Wawa, Buc-ee's, and Sheetz are expanding into new territories, broadening their reach.

Wawa, a beloved brand with roots in [Pennsylvania](#), has become synonymous with its fresh sandwiches, coffee, and a highly loyal customer base. Wawa has been a major player in the c-store space in recent years, with a revamped menu driving ever-stronger foot traffic to its Mid-Atlantic region stores. Between January and August 2024, YoY visits to the chain were mostly elevated. And the chain is now [venturing](#) into states like Florida – where its store count has grown [significantly](#) over the past few years – as well as Georgia and Alabama.

Meanwhile, Texas favorite Buc-ee's, though known for its enormous stores and mind boggling array of dining options, has a relatively small footprint – but that might be changing. The chain, which also outpaced its already-strong [2023](#) performance this year, is opening locations in [Arkansas](#) and [North Carolina](#), further building on its reputation as a destination for travelers. And Sheetz, another regional chain with a strong presence in Pennsylvania, is also expanding, with plans to open locations in Southern states like North Carolina and Tennessee.



Taking the Pulse of Statewide Dwell Times

This trend toward regional expansion offers significant opportunities for growth, not only by increasing store count, but also by reaching new consumer bases and target audiences. Customer behavior differs between markets – and by expanding into new areas, c-stores can tap into unique local visitation patterns.

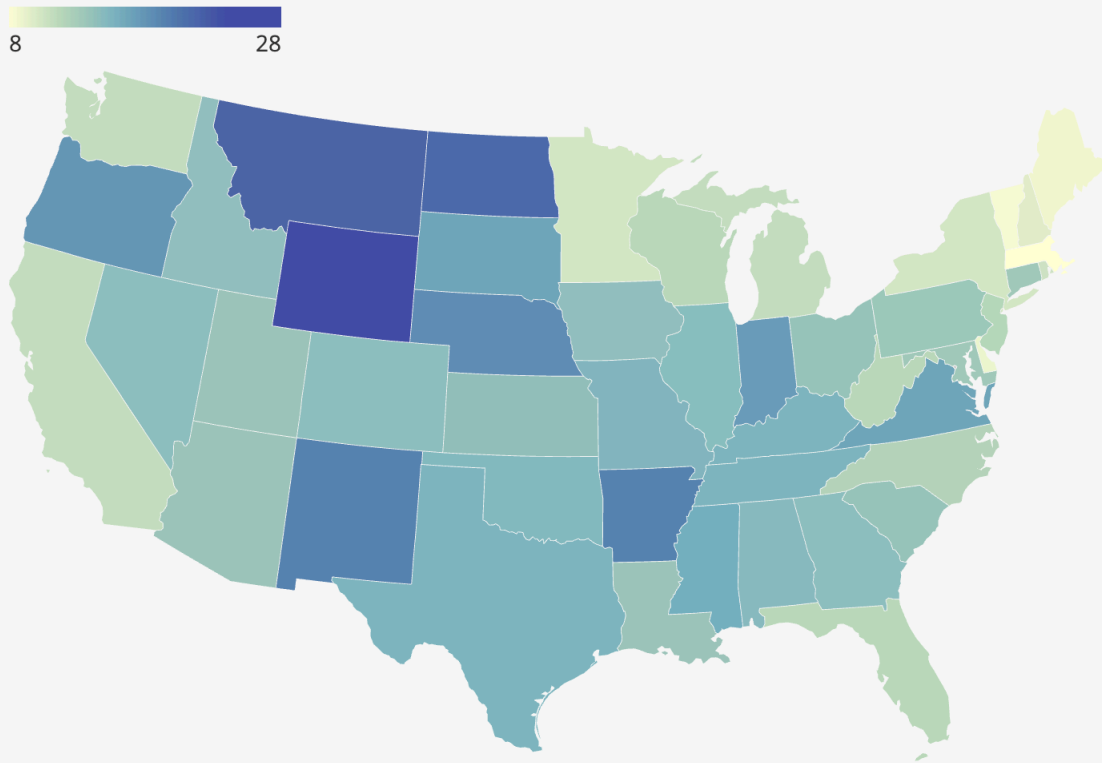
One metric that highlights local differences in consumer behavior is dwell time, or the amount of time a customer spends inside a convenience store per visit. In some regions, visitors tend to move in and out quickly, while in others, customers linger for longer periods of time.

Analyzing convenience store dwell times by state highlights substantial differences in visitor behavior. During the first eight months of 2024, coastal states (with the exception of Oregon) tended to see shorter average dwell times (between 7.5 and 11.8 minutes). On the other hand, in states like Wyoming, Montana, and North Dakota, average dwell times ranged between 21.2 and 28.2 minutes.

Interestingly, the states with the longest dwell times also have some of the highest percentages of [truck traffic](#) on interstate highways – suggesting that these longer stops are perhaps made by long-haul truckers looking for a place to shower, relax, and [grab a bite](#) to eat.

Median Dwell Time to Gas Stations & C-Stores Varies By State, Coastal States Tend To See Shorter Dwell Times

Average Dwell Time In Minutes | January to August 2024



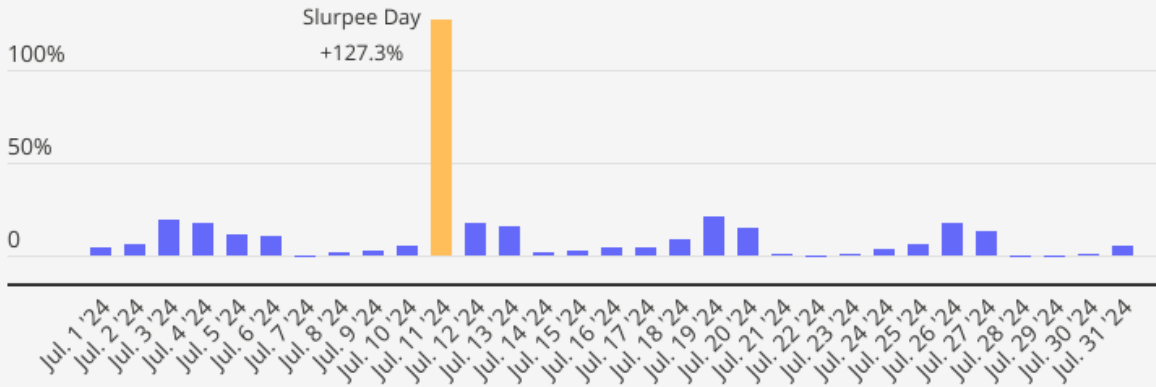
Limited-Time Options

Even as regional favorites expand their reach, nationwide classic 7-Eleven is taking steps to further [cement](#) its growing role as a prime grab-and-go food and beverage destination. And like other dining destinations, the chain relies on [limited-time offers](#) (LTOs) to fuel excitement – and visits.

One of the most iconic, and beloved c-store LTOs is 7-Eleven's [Slurpee Day](#), which falls each year on July 11th. The event, during which all 7-Eleven locations hand out free slurpees, tends to drive [significant](#) upticks in foot traffic – and this year was no exception. Visits to the convenience store jumped by a whopping 127.3% on July 11th, 2024 relative to the YTD daily visit average – proving that good deals will bring customers in the door.

Daily Visits to 7-Eleven Get Major Boost on Slurpee Day

Daily Visits Compared to YTD Visit Average | January 1 - September 5, 2024



A Strong Year for Convenience Stores

The convenience store sector continues building on the impressive growth seen in 2023. As many chains double down on expanding both their regional presence and their offerings, will they continue to drive growth in the coming years?

Visit Placer.ai to keep up with the latest data-driven convenience store updates.