

2026

Grocery Store Humanity Index StudySM

*What Makes a Grocery Brand Feel
Human in 2026? Shoppers Recognize
Standout Grocery Store Brands*

1,100+

U.S. consumers
surveyed nationally

±3%

Margin of error at
95% confidence level

5%

Feel no grocery brand
truly cares

BETTER BUYER™ | NATIONAL CONSUMER STUDY

By Matthew Scroggs | March 2026

Madison Albury
Senior Research Editor

[Read the full study + award honorees →](#)



In an era of rising food costs and rapid retail automation, the relationship between grocery stores and their customers has reached a critical turning point. Better Buyer's 2026 Grocery Store Humanity Index StudySM—based on a nationally representative sample of more than 1,100 U.S. consumers—shows that what makes a brand feel "human" is changing. Modern shoppers don't just want a smile at checkout. They want stores that respect their time, provide transparent value, and deliver consistent reliability.

KEY TAKEAWAYS — *The 2026 study establishes a clear hierarchy of what matters most. Value (62%) and Convenience (56%) remain the foundational expectations, but Reliability (48%) and Transparency (32%) are what actually differentiate brands in consumers' minds. Notably, 5% of respondents feel that no grocery brand truly cares about its customers—which means there's significant opportunity for brands willing to close the connection gap.*

QUICK BACKGROUND

The Brand Humanity Index is Better Buyer's framework for measuring the "emotional intelligence" of commerce. Rather than tracking basic customer satisfaction, the BHI measures six core relational dimensions: Empathy, Transparency, Fairness, Authenticity, Trust, and Reliability. By quantifying these attributes, the Index identifies which brands have moved beyond simple transactions to build genuine connections that drive long-term loyalty and advocacy.

RELIABILITY WINS, EFFICIENCY IS RESPECT

Here's a surprising finding: consumers don't see efficiency and humanity as opposites. Reliability ranked as the top human quality at 48%.

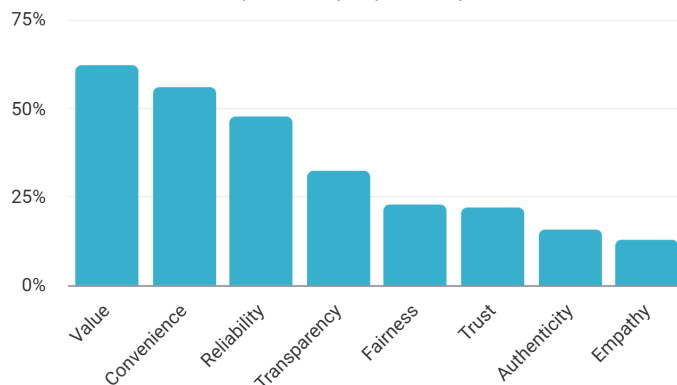
When choosing between two equidistant stores, 59% of shoppers are influenced by "a consistent, efficient experience every time."

The data suggests efficiency is actually a form of respect, and this sentiment varies by demographic:

- **Age matters:** 64% of shoppers aged 60+ prioritize consistency and efficiency in their store choice, compared to 50% of those aged 18–29.
- **Gender dynamics:** Among factors driving long-term loyalty, 55% of female shoppers cite consistency and efficiency, compared to 47% of male shoppers.

Satisfaction Drivers

When choosing a grocery store, which of these qualities are most important to you personally?



Source: 2026 Grocery Store Humanity Index Study



THE NEW CURRENCY OF TRUST

Beyond the basics, Transparency (32%)—openness about pricing, food origins, and sourcing—emerged as the leading emotional differentiator. It significantly outpaces both Trust (22%) and Authenticity (16%).

This finding intensifies with income level. Among households earning \$150,000–\$174,999, the importance of Transparency jumps to 54%. For higher earners, clear information is a primary marker of whether a brand feels human.

Fair and transparent pricing also drives long-term loyalty at 43%. Shoppers are increasingly wary of hidden costs and gravitate toward brands that are honest about the value they provide.

32%

Transparency as the leading emotional differentiator

54%

Transparency importance among \$150k-\$175k households

43%

Fair pricing driving long-term loyalty

THE EMPLOYEE FACTOR

Shoppers use employee treatment as a proxy for brand values. 43% say "a warm, personal experience where employees make you feel valued" would influence their choice between two stores.

The open-ended responses were particularly telling. Consumers want stores that don't feel "oppressive or corporate." One respondent described the most human stores as having "humans who enjoy working for you and are well taken care of," specifically calling out HEB because employees are genuine and helpful "even in the worst neighborhoods."

- *"Allow employees to comfortably take time to assist shoppers."*
- *"The people who work there are always happy, genuine, and helpful."*
- *"Not a major reliance on self checkout so you can have the interaction."*
- *"Workers [should] focus on interacting with customers."*
- *"Make us feel like guests not customers."*



Josiah Flex
Senior Analyst

THE LOYALTY BLUEPRINT

To build a genuinely loyal customer base in 2026, three factors are non-negotiable:

52%

CONSISTENCY

Delivering the same reliable experience every visit

43%

FAIR PRICING

No hidden fees or sudden pricing shifts

42%

RECOGNITION

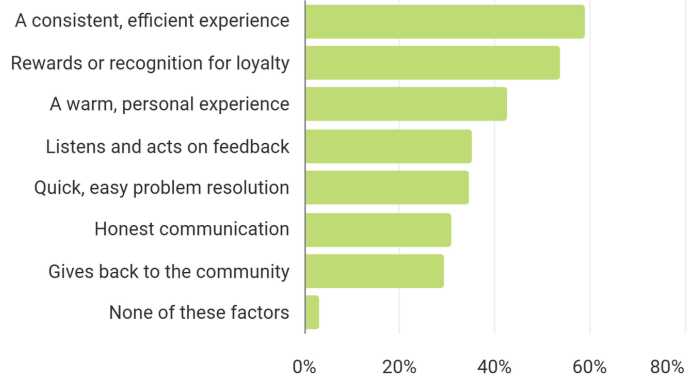
Acknowledging customer loyalty through meaningful rewards



Jessica Goodrum
Content Marketing Director

Influential Factors

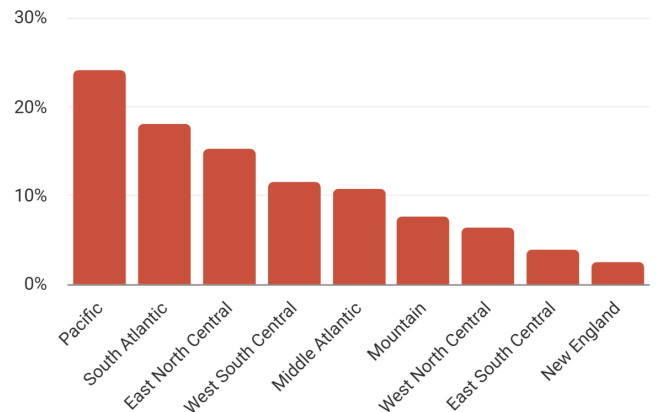
If two grocery stores were located the same distance from you, which of these factors would influence you to choose one over the other?



Source: 2026 Grocery Store Humanity Index Study



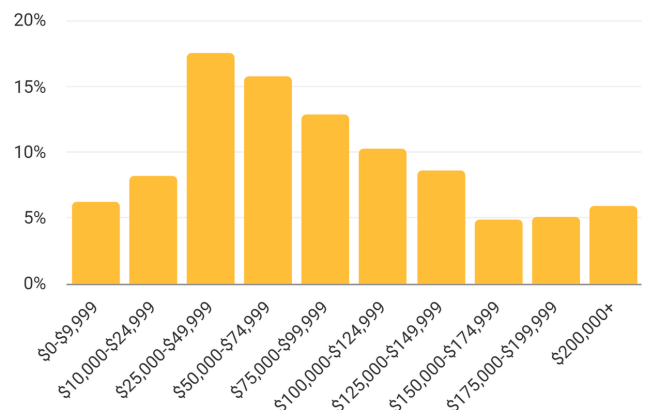
Major US Regions



Source: Better Buyer



Household Income



Source: Better Buyer





Award Categories:

National · Super Regional · Regional · Local

COMMUNITY OVER CORPORATE

The stores that make shoppers feel the most valued aren't defined by their size or national marketing budgets. In recognition of the stores doing it right, Better Buyer is acknowledging the grocery brands that shoppers explicitly named as caring most about their customers. National brands like Trader Joe's have successfully earned this recognition by scaling a "local" feel—maintaining an unscripted, approachable store atmosphere that translates seamlessly across state lines.

But the data also shows that a human touch is fiercely local. In regions like the West South Central, a notable 22% of shoppers bypassed listed options to write in their own local favorites. HEB and Publix were frequent recipients of these write-in votes, earning their own distinction for brand humanity. It's a strong signal that regional grocers who invest in their immediate communities can build bonds with their shoppers, proving that humanity in retail is about deep roots, not just wide reach.



Watch: Key Findings from the 2026 Grocery Store Humanity Index Study

Click to view the animated study breakdown at betterbuyer.com



Stephanie McCauley
Social Media Manager

BOTTOM LINE

The 2026 Grocery Store Humanity Index study shows that for American grocery shoppers, the "most human" brand isn't necessarily the one with the most community marketing. It's the one that respects the consumer's time, wallet, and intelligence. As automation continues to reshape retail, the winning brands will be those that use technology to enhance human reliability—not replace it.

“What makes a brand feel ‘human’ is changing.”

— 2026 Grocery Store Humanity Index Study | Better Buyer

BRAND HUMANITY AWARD

The Brand Humanity Award honors companies that consumers identify as caring and people-first based on perceptions of empathy, transparency, fairness, trust, reliability, and authenticity.

NATIONAL	SUPER REGIONAL	REGIONAL	LOCAL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trader Joe's • Costco • Whole Foods Market 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aldi — MW • H-E-B — S • Meijer — MW • Publix — SE • Sprouts — W + more honorees... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brookshire's — S • Central Market — S • Fresh Thyme — MW • Market Basket — NE • Raley's — W + more honorees... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buehler's Fresh Foods — OH • Dorothy Lane Market — OH • Fresh Encounter — OH • Heinen's — OH • Jungle Jim's — OH + more honorees...

**Only companies identified by consumers in the study can be named honorees.*

47 institutions recognized across all four categories.

View the full award list and learn more about each honoree at betterbuyer.com ▶



METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted by Better Buyer to evaluate consumer perceptions of humanity within the U.S. grocery industry. Data was collected via survey from 1,107 U.S. consumers, providing a ±3% margin of error at a 95% confidence level. All answer choices were randomized to eliminate order bias. The sample was 56% female and 44% male. Age distribution: 15% (18–29), 43% (30–44), 27% (45–60), and 15% (60+). The largest income segment was the \$25,000–\$49,999 bracket (18%). Regional participation was led by the Pacific (24%), South Atlantic (18%), and East North Central (15%) regions.

PROMOTIONAL USE

Our awards are derived from independent consumer perception research conducted through nationally representative surveys. Companies named in this study may reference their recognition in editorial or news contexts. However, using the designation name, title, badge, or logo in advertising, marketing, or sales materials requires prior written authorization and an active licensing agreement.



Helping buyers make better decisions.

Backed by real consumer feedback, our ratings, reviews, studies, and videos help people make better purchasing decisions while equipping businesses with practical insights that guide improvements across the customer experience.



Every day we strive to be...



Your guide to smarter buying.

We share insights from real customers to help you make more confident decisions.



Trusted research for better choices.

We help you compare companies based on the experiences of real people like you.



Insight that helps brands improve.

We uncover what customers value most—helping businesses focus and improve.

ABOUT THE BRAND HUMANITY INDEX

The Brand Humanity Index is Better Buyer's framework for measuring the "emotional intelligence" of commerce.

Rather than tracking basic customer satisfaction, the BHI measures six core relational dimensions:

- Empathy
- Transparency
- Fairness
- Authenticity
- Trust
- Reliability

By quantifying these attributes, the Index identifies which brands have moved beyond simple transactions to build genuine connections that drive long-term loyalty and advocacy.



MATTHEW SCROGGS

Drawing on more than a decade of experience at one of the world's most respected market research firms, Matt witnessed the immense value of authoritative consumer data. He saw how global, iconic brands used structured research to measure satisfaction, refine their customer experiences, and dominate their markets. But he also noticed a gap. It isn't just the Fortune 500 that need to know exactly where they stand with their customers—businesses of every size deserve that insight.

Today, as CEO of RivalMind (publisher of Better Buyer), Matt makes this standard of survey research accessible to the entire market—studying consumer opinions at scale to reveal what real people actually think. For the consumer, Better Buyer acts as a guide to smarter buying. For the business leader, it serves as the ultimate reality check—equipping brands with practical insights to drive improvements across the customer experience.