

2026

2026 Caring Grocery Stores Study

What Makes a Grocery Brand Feel Caring 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

RIVALMIND | NATIONAL CONSUMER STUDY

By Matthew Scroggs

Madison Albury
Senior Research Editor

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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. RivalMind's 2026 Caring Grocery Stores Study—based on a nationally representative sample of more than 1,100 U.S. consumers—shows that what makes a brand feel "caring" 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 RivalMind 2026 Caring Grocery Stores Study measures "emotional intelligence" of commerce. Rather than tracking basic customer satisfaction, the study measures six core relational dimensions: Empathy, Transparency, Fairness, Authenticity, Trust, and Reliability. By quantifying these attributes, the study 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 caring as opposites. Reliability ranked as the top quality at 48%.

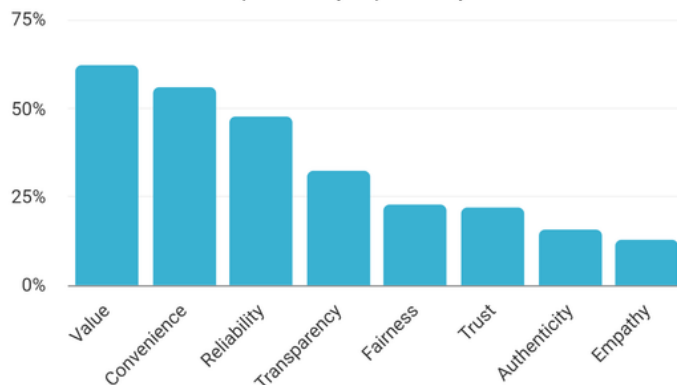
When choosing between two equidistant stores, 59% of shoppers are influenced by "a consistent, efficient experience every time."

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 Caring Grocery Stores Study

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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 caring.

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 caring 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

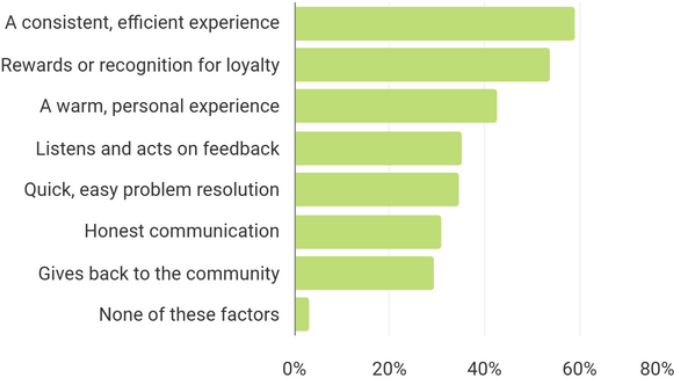
Acknowledging customer loyalty through meaningful rewards



Jessica Goodrum
Content Marketing Director

Influential Factors

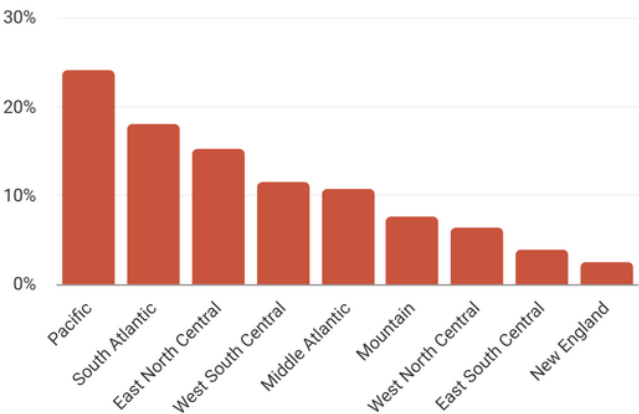
If two grocery stores were located the same distance from you, which of these factors would influence you to choose one over the other?



Source: 2026 Caring Grocery Stores Study

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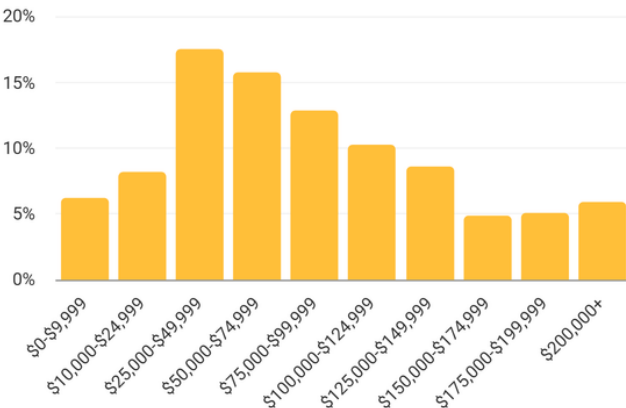
Major US Regions



Source: 2026 Caring Grocery Stores Study

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Household Income



Source: 2026 Caring Grocery Stores Study

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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, RivalMind 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 caring touch is fiercely local. In regions like the West South Central, a notable 22% of respondents, rather than naming major national brands, wrote in local favorites. HEB and Publix were frequent recipients of these write-in votes, earning their own distinction for caring. It's a strong signal that regional grocers who invest in their immediate communities can build bonds with their shoppers, proving that care in retail is about deep roots, not just wide reach.



Watch: Key Findings from the 2026 Caring Grocery Stores Study

Click to view the animated study breakdown at rivalmind.com



Stephanie McCauley
Social Media Manager

BOTTOM LINE

The 2026 Caring Grocery Stores Study shows that for American grocery shoppers, the "most caring" 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 | RivalMind

CARING BRAND AWARD

The Caring Brand Award honors companies named by consumers, unaided, in our national study as the brands they believe care most about their customers. Honorees must meet a minimum mention threshold (see awards methodology online).

NATIONAL		SUPER REGIONAL
• Aldi	• Walmart	• Albertsons
• Amazon	• Whole Foods	• Kroger
• Costco		• Safeway
• Target		• Sprouts Farmers Market
• Trader Joe's		• WinCo Foods

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

A mark of excellence, backed by the voices of real consumers.

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



METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted by RivalMind to evaluate consumer perceptions of caring 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 brands make better decisions.

We exist to help companies thrive, driving transformational growth through innovative digital marketing. Our consumer research equips businesses with practical insights that guide improvements across the entire customer experience.

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Every day we strive to be...

1

Your guide to smarter marketing.

We uncover what customers value most to help you focus and improve.

2

Your competitive advantage.

Informed by the experiences of real people, we consult, educate, and execute.

3

Your favorite employee.

We take an owner's perspective, leveraging our business brains and marketing savvy.

ABOUT OUR STUDIES

RivalMind's caring brand studies measure the "emotional intelligence" of commerce.

Rather than tracking basic customer satisfaction, our studies measure six core relational dimensions:

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

By quantifying these attributes, our studies identify 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, Matt makes this standard of survey research accessible to the entire market—studying consumer opinions at scale to reveal what real people actually think. Not only does this fuel intelligent marketing, it serves as the ultimate reality check for business leaders—equipping brands with practical insights to drive improvements across the entire customer experience.