Snipp

SURVEY REPORT

At the Pump and in the Aisle:

How rising gas prices are reshaping American grocery carts

New consumer research from Snipp reveals that higher gas prices are doing more than draining wallets at the pump. They're fundamentally changing how Americans shop, spend, and plan.

The sharp rise in US fuel prices since early 2026, with the national average climbing 64 cents in a single month to $3.58 per gallon as of March 2026, is reverberating well beyond the gas pump. As household budgets come under pressure, grocery shoppers are making meaningful adjustments in how much they spend, which products they choose, and how often they make the trip to the store.

The findings offer a clear-eyed view of how rising fuel costs are reshaping the American grocery basket, and what that means for retailers, brands, and category managers.

Methodology

This survey, conducted in March 2026 on a nationally representative sample of 1000 US adult grocery shoppers, was designed to measure the behavioral consequences of these rising fuel costs.

Respondents were screened using two qualifying questions: grocery shopping frequency (must shop at least once monthly) and awareness of gas price changes (retained across all answer choices to preserve a meaningful contrast group). The survey comprised of 12 substantive question spanning spending behavior, category cutbacks, trip frequency, local sourcing, private label switching, and forward-looking sentiment.

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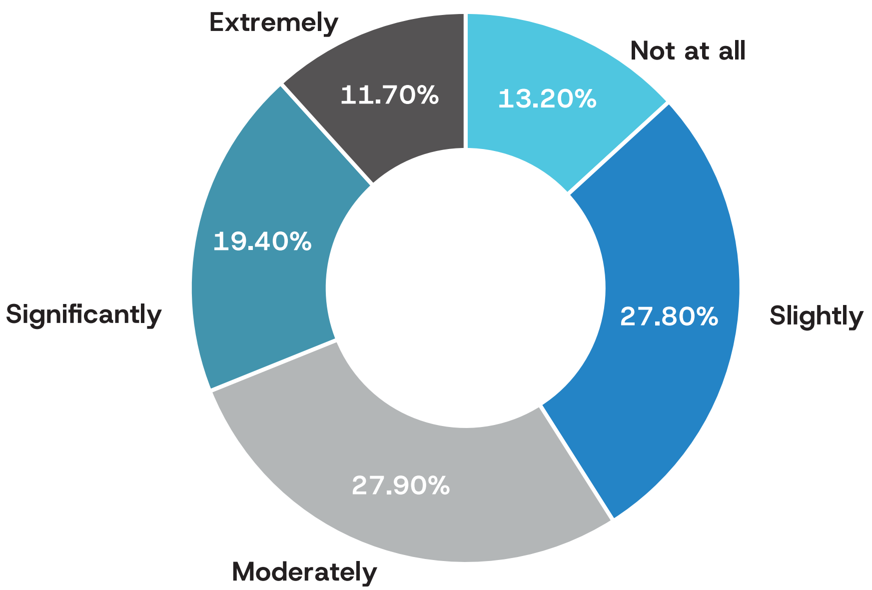
Fuel Price Impact on Household Budgets

Before examining specific grocery behaviors, it is important to establish the baseline: how much are shoppers actually feeling the pinch at the pump? The answer sets the context for every behavioral shift that follows, and reveals that the pressure is neither uniform nor limited to any single income group.

How significantly have recent gas price increases impacted your household budget?

The sample skews toward awareness without extreme distress. With 31.1% reporting significant-to-extreme impact and 41% reporting slight-to-no impact, the distribution remains broadly balanced. A notable 27.9% sit in the moderate middle. This means fuel price sensitivity is diffuse across the population — not concentrated in a single income or lifestyle segment — requiring tiered value messaging strategies rather than a single blanket approach.



Insight & Takeaway:

Tiered Value Is Essential

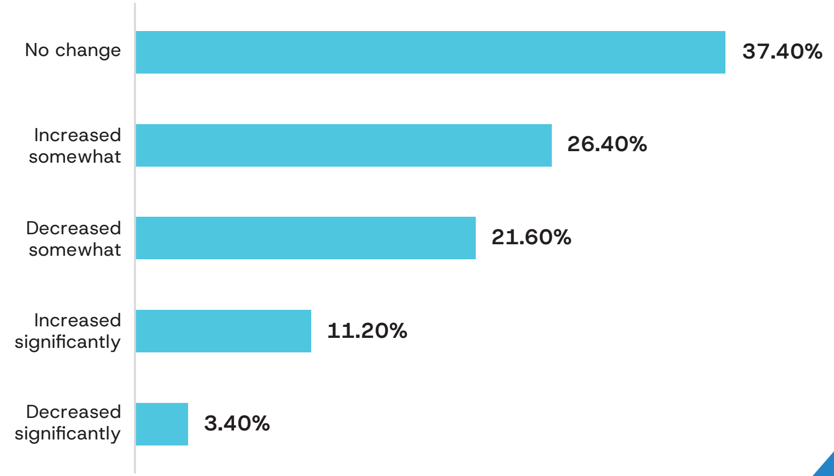
Nearly 6 in 10 shoppers feel fuel prices to some degree. The 13.2% unaffected segment remains a key anchor for premium SKU performance, while the sizable moderate-to-extreme cohort (59%) demands visible value signals. One-size-fits-all promotional strategies will underperform in this environment.

Overall Spending Changes

With fuel costs eating into household budgets, this section tracks the direct financial response: have shoppers changed what they spend on groceries, and do they attribute those changes to higher gas prices? Two questions work in tandem here – one measuring the change in grocery spend itself, the other measuring the broader spending adjustment attributable to fuel costs. Together, they quantify the scale of the economic ripple effect.

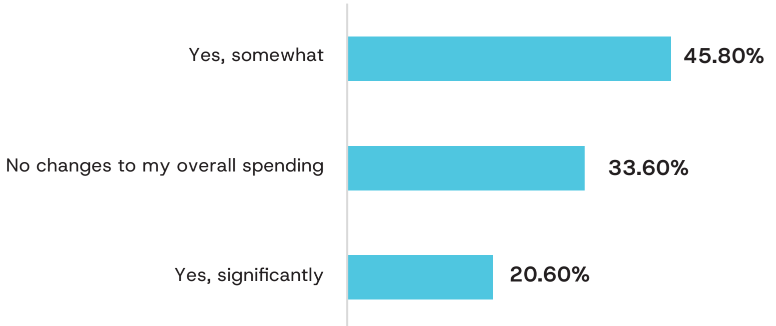
Compared to 3 months ago, how has your weekly grocery spending changed?

Grocery spending is under dual pressure. 37.6% report increased grocery spending vs. three months ago, with staples like beef and coffee surging considerably more. A meaningful 25% report actively spending less, likely reflecting trade-down or pantry depletion strategies. 37.4% report no change, suggesting a resilient but watchful middle segment.



Have you changed your overall spending habits because of higher gas prices?

66.4% of shoppers have changed their overall spending habits, at least somewhat, as a direct consequence of higher gas prices. Only 33.6% report no change. This confirms that fuel price shocks carry a broad spending ripple effect that extends well beyond the tank.



Insight & Takeaway:

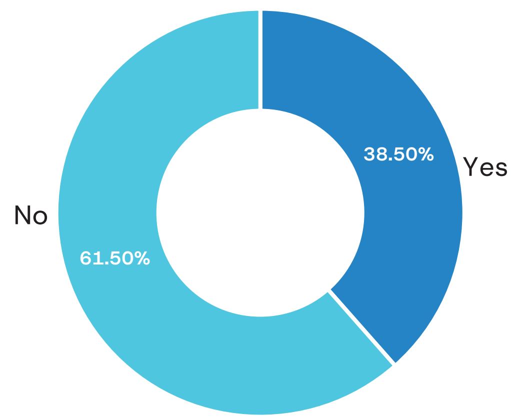
The Ssqueeze is real

Over 2 in 3 shoppers have adjusted spending patterns. This signals an urgent need to anchor promotional strategy in everyday essentials and to activate loyalty mechanisms that retain wallet share during budget compression.

The spending impact reaches well beyond the weekly grocery run.

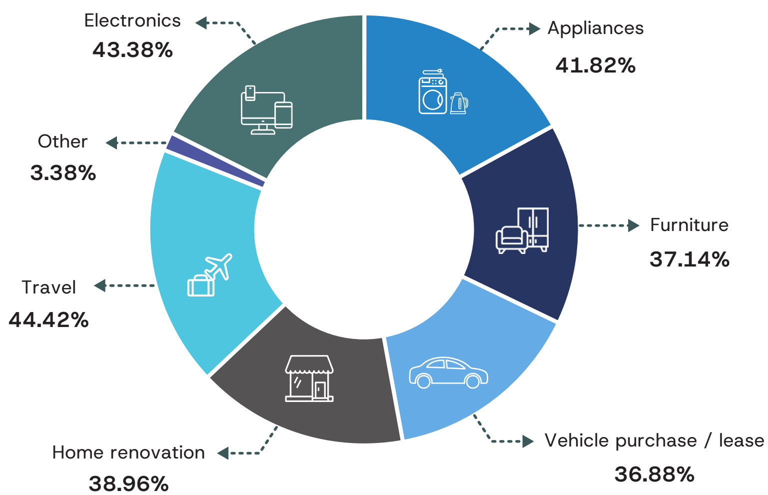
Have you delayed or postponed any major purchases due to higher gas prices?

38.5% have delayed or postponed a major purchase as a direct result of higher fuel costs, suggesting some consumer adaptation. Gas price pressure is compressing not just day-to-day spend but longer-term purchasing intent, with consequences extending across retail categories far outside grocery.



What types of purchases have you delayed?

Among the 38.5% who deferred a major purchase, travel tops the list (44.4%), followed closely by electronics (43.4%), appliances (41.8%), home renovation (39.0%), furniture (37.1%), and vehicle purchase or lease (36.9%). The breadth of affected categories underscores that higher fuel costs are acting as a broad economic brake, not a grocery-specific pressure.



Insight & Takeaway:

Broader consumer confidence contraction

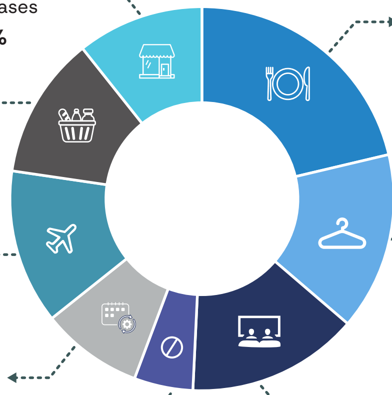
The deferral of major purchases across categories points to a multi-front squeeze. Shoppers arriving at the store are financially stretched elsewhere, reinforcing the urgency of value positioning, promotions, and loyalty investment to protect basket size and visit frequency.

Category-Level Cutbacks

Knowing that budgets are under pressure tells only part of the story. This section goes deeper to identify precisely where shoppers are pulling back, both across their total household spend and within the grocery basket itself. The data maps a clear hierarchy of sacrifice: which categories get cut first, which hold on longest, and where the boundary between discretionary and essential is beginning to blur.

In which of the following categories have you reduced spending?

Dining out absorbs the sharpest cutback (63.6%), indicating that restaurant spend is the first sacrifice when budgets tighten — a potential uplift for grocery cooking occasions. Clothing (44.7%), entertainment (43.2%), and travel (38.9%) follow. Grocery spending itself (trading down or buying less) was cited by 35.8%, a significant signal given that grocery is a non-discretionary necessity.



In which grocery categories are you spending less?

Snacks and beverages (51.7%) lead cutbacks by a wide margin, consistent with their discretionary positioning. Alcohol (38.1%), fresh meat and seafood (34.9%), and prepared/deli foods (32.9%) follow. Notably, even two core staples of fresh produce (20.1%) and dairy (18.7%) are seeing cutbacks, indicating pressure reaching into essential categories.

Insight & Takeaway:

Discretionary takes the hit, essentials feel the pressure too

Snacks, alcohol, and prepared foods face the sharpest cuts, but pressure is cascading into produce and dairy. Brands in premium and impulse categories face the highest risk. Private label and value-tier SKUs across these categories are well-positioned.

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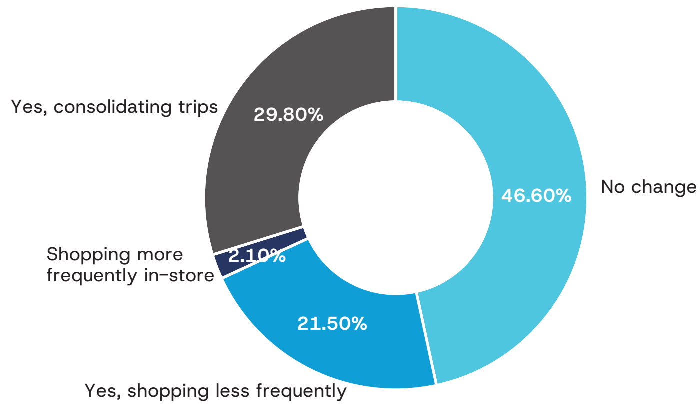
Shopping Trip Frequency & Store Choice

Higher fuel prices do not just change what shoppers buy, they change how they get there. Every trip to the store now carries an explicit fuel cost, making trip frequency and store proximity economic decisions in their own right. his section examines if shoppers are changing how often they go, where they go, and whether they are shifting any portion of purchasing to digital channels to sidestep the cost of driving altogether.

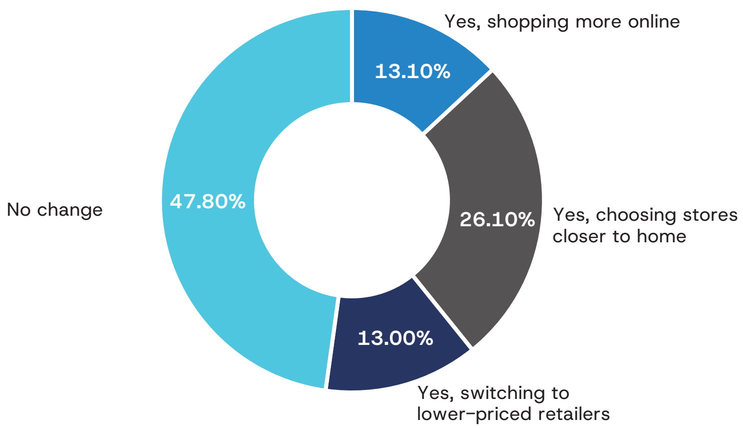
Have you changed how often you shop in-store due to the rise in gas prices?

53.4% of shoppers have altered their in-store trip behavior. Consolidating trips is the dominant response (29.8%) — shoppers are buying more per visit to reduce driving, while 21.5% are simply shopping less frequently. Only 2.1% are shopping more.



Have higher gas prices caused you to change where or how you shop?

Among the 52.2% who changed shopping location or channel, choosing stores closer to home is the leading strategy (26.1%). Switching to lower-priced retailers accounts for 13%, while 13.1% have shifted more purchases online — a channel that eliminates the fuel cost of the trip entirely.



Insight & Takeaway:

Trip consolidation is the dominant adaptation

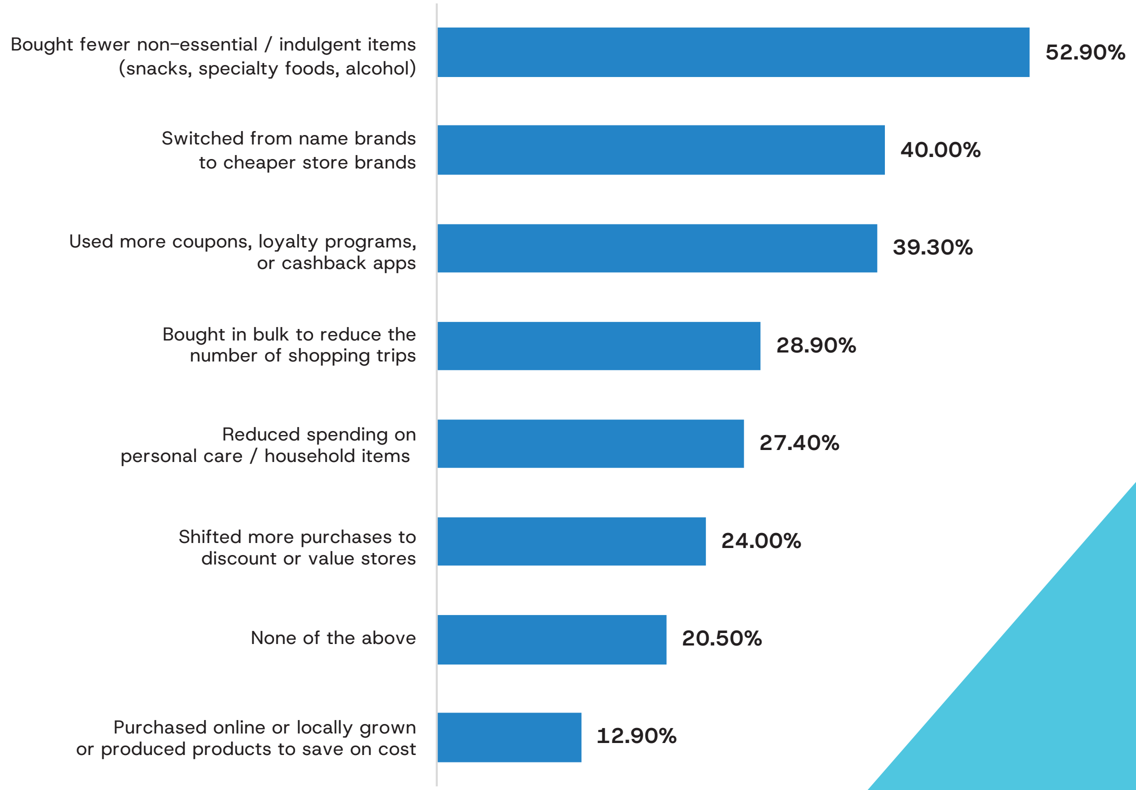
Trip consolidation is the dominant adaptation, not trip elimination. This has important implications for basket size (higher per-trip spend) and category adjacency — shoppers making fewer trips are more likely to stock up and less likely to make impulse purchases. Proximity and online convenience are emerging competitive advantages.

Brand & Sourcing Choices

When budgets tighten, shoppers make deliberate trade-offs about what they buy and where it comes from. This section examines the shift from national brands to private label, as well as other budget management tactics. Together, they reveal which product-level adaptations are gaining traction — and which are not.

Which of the following actions have you taken to manage your grocery budget due to higher gas prices?

Buying fewer non-essential items tops the list (52.9%), followed by private label switching (40.0%) — the second most common adaptation. Coupon and loyalty program usage (39.3%) is essentially tied with store brand switching, underlining the dual role of price and reward. Bulk buying (28.9%) reflects the consolidation dynamic seen in trip frequency data. By contrast, local sourcing remains a niche behavior at 12.9%.



Insight & Takeaway:

Private label trade-down is the defining product shift

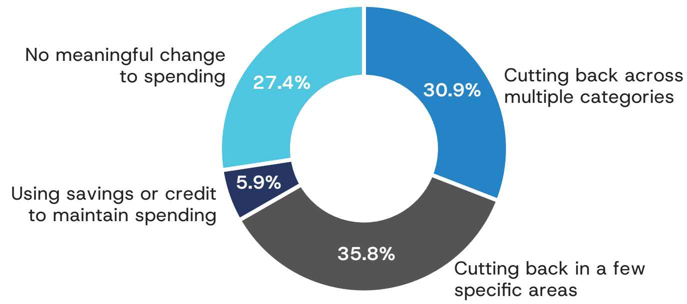
4 in 10 shoppers are actively switching to store brands, creating a clear opportunity for retailers to expand and elevate own-brand assortments. For national brands, the priority is to sharpen value propositions through visible promotions, pack-size innovation, or stronger quality differentiation. Local sourcing is not registering as a meaningful cost-management tool at the population level.

Coping Strategies & Forward Sentiment

The final section looks both inward and forward: how are shoppers characterizing their overall approach to managing higher costs right now, and what do they expect, and intend, if fuel prices remain elevated or rise further? This forward-looking dimension is critical for planning; it distinguishes a transient adjustment from a structural shift in consumer behavior that retailers and brands must build into their longer-term strategies.

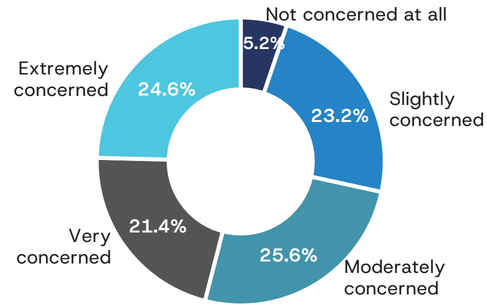
Which statement best describes how you are managing higher gas costs?

66.7% of shoppers are in active cutback mode — either across multiple categories (30.9%) or in specific targeted areas (35.8%). Only 5.9% are dipping into savings or credit to maintain spending levels.



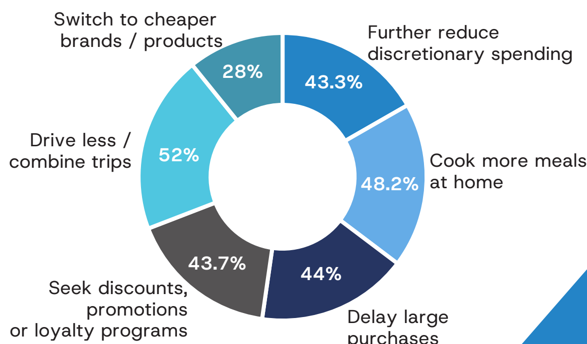
How concerned are you that your grocery costs will continue to rise over the next 6 months?

Forward-looking sentiment is decidedly negative. 46% of all respondents are very or extremely concerned about continued grocery cost increases over the next six months. Only 5.2% express no concern. This elevated anxiety signals that behavioral adaptations are likely to deepen — not reverse — in the near term.



If gas prices remain high, what actions are you most likely to take?

The top forward-looking actions are driving less / combining trips (52.0%) and cooking more meals at home (48.2%), followed by delaying large purchases (44.0%) and seeking more discounts and promotions (43.7%). Switching to cheaper brands is cited by 28.0%, confirming that private label trade-down has further room to accelerate.



Insight & Takeaway:

Forward sentiment is bearish

Consumers expect conditions to worsen, and their declared intent reflects continued and deepening adaptation, not recovery. The anticipated shift toward home cooking is a major opportunity for grocery retailers to capture food service spend. Promotions and loyalty programs will be critical levers for retaining price-sensitive shoppers.

Conclusion

This 1,000-respondent survey delivers a clear verdict: rising fuel prices are a material force reshaping how Americans shop for groceries. The behavioral changes are broad, multi-dimensional, and — based on forward sentiment — unlikely to reverse in the near term.

Overall spending cutbacks

66.4%

have changed spending habits;

66% are actively cutting back

Fewer shopping trips

53.4%

have altered trip frequency; consolidation is the dominant mode

Shift to private label

40%

have switched to store brands, 2nd most common adaptation

Strategic Implications for Brands & Marketers

For brands and marketers, the strategic imperative is unambiguous: competing on awareness alone is insufficient. Shoppers consolidating trips, trading down, and actively hunting promotions are making calculated decisions at every touchpoint. The brands that show up with tangible value, the right price point, pack size, and promotion at the right moment, will hold their ground. The ones that don't will lose share to private label.

For Retailers

Expand private label assortments, activate loyalty programs, and compete on proximity and digital convenience. Capture food service occasions as more consumers shift to cooking at home.

For National Brands

The trade-down to store brands is real and accelerating. Justify your premium through visible promotions, offers, pack-size innovation, and sharper quality differentiation or cede share.

For Category Managers

Snacks, alcohol, and prepared foods face the sharpest pressure. Even produce and dairy are feeling it. Plan assortments, cross promotions and pricing strategies for a sustained, not transient cost environment.

For Marketers

43.7% of shoppers will actively seek promotions if prices stay high. Make promotional strategy and loyalty offers central to your go-to-market plan. he pump
is telling consumers something has changed. The smartest brands are already listening.

Snipp is how brands drive actions, prove performance, and unlock insights across consumer and channel marketing strategies. Using AI-powered technology and advanced fraud protection, we design, execute, and validate compliant promotions, rebates, sweepstakes, rewards, and loyalty programs at scale, transforming engagement into proven outcomes and owned first-party intelligence that powers meaningful, measurable growth.

For over a decade, we have worked with the world's leading organizations in both B2C and B2B spaces, across industry verticals including CPG, retail, pharma, utility, home and outdoor, alcohol, tobacco, lifestyle and more.

Visit us at snipp.com for more details and program examples.

Snipp offers the following solutions

Receipt Processing

Scale activations and reward consumers - an OCR powered validation of any purchase (receipt/PO/invoice etc.) or non-purchase (image, survey, social, etc.) transaction. Retailer and device agnostic. Capture invaluable data.

Promotions & Sweepstakes

Create sweepstakes, GWP, cash-back, instant win, gamification, social media and shopper promotions to drive sales and engagement. Setup, legal and fulfillment too.

Loyalty

Modular customer loyalty platform with comprehensive earn and burn mechanisms as well as deep personalization and segmentation to drive engagement and retention.

Rebates

Streamlined Digital Rebate Management. Flexible, efficient, scalable and secure. One-stop platform for multiple rebate programs for consumers and B2B channel partners.

Rewards

Incentivize and reward customers with an exhaustive catalog-across any geography, industry or consumer demographic. 250+ categories and 58+ currencies.

Digital Offers

Create, distribute, track and measure single or multi-brand digital barcode offers from a single platform that includes the industry first Financial Media Network.

Media Networks

Reach an untapped audience of 65 million+! Brands, retailers and RMNs can reach a bank's audience with SKU-level offers and promotions on everyday spend items.

Data & Analytics

Capture and make sense of complex consumer behaviors and purchase patterns. Turn this into actionable insights for personalization and engagement.

Snipp's turnkey contests, sweepstakes and shopper marketing promotions solutions – powered by our market-leading AI receipt validation platform can help you acquire and engage customers while capturing first-party consumer purchase and behavioral data!

LET'S TALK