



2026 TRENDS

Beverage

TREND 1

Simplified Beverages Redefine Wellness

TREND 2

Restructuring for Agility and Growth

TREND 3

Protein Beverages Go Mainstream

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Packaging as a Sustainability Statement

Moving into 2026, the [beverage industry](#) is adjusting to changes in consumer expectations and an accelerated shift toward simplified, functional ingredients. As shoppers bring wellness into daily routines, drinks now carry responsibilities that previously belonged to supplements or food.

Companies are also [reworking operating models](#) to protect margins and manage inflation while strengthening investment in categories with clearer momentum. Meanwhile, [regulatory focus on synthetic dyes](#) and packaging sustainability is reshaping timelines for reformulation and design.

By examining the forces guiding product creation and consumer engagement, this report outlines the trends that will influence beverage strategies in 2026 and offers direction for teams looking ahead.



TREND 1

Simplified Beverages Redefine Wellness

Simplified beverages are becoming essential in the wellness landscape as consumers adopt low-sugar formulations with short ingredient lists that integrate easily into daily habits.

Spending on non-alcoholic drinks grew [6.2% in 2025](#) compared with 2.4% growth for alcohol, revealing how growth in hydration and gut-health are outpacing those of traditional refreshment options.



The simplified-ingredient segment has shifted from niche to mass market as shoppers rely on beverages to support energy, digestion, focus, and general well-being. Global demand reflects the same trajectory, with the functional beverage market projected to rise from \$164.8 billion in 2024 to [more than \\$218 billion by 2029](#).

Growth in the U.S. functional beverage segment is also tied to [preventative health behaviors](#) and heightened awareness of lifestyle-related illness. Brands are focusing on recognizable ingredient panels and cues like [no artificial colors or natural sweeteners](#).

As competition grows, transparency is increasingly separating leaders from the broader field. Olipop has invested in clinical work showing improved blood-sugar responses compared with traditional cola and continues publishing research related to digestion and metabolic performance to reinforce credibility. [PepsiCo's \\$1.95 billion acquisition of Poppi](#) signals how prebiotic, low-sugar soda formats have reached mainstream relevance and created a new standard for nutrient-forward refreshment. It also signals the interest of the largest CPG companies to leverage their distribution capabilities to turbo-charge value capture from sustainable consumer trends.

Regulatory changes are further strengthening clean-label momentum. The [FDA](#) introduced a natural blue color from gardenia fruit and encouraged faster removal of Red No. 3, accelerating industry-wide reformulation ahead of the 2027 transition. Kraft Heinz reported that about [90% of its U.S. portfolio](#) is already free from synthetic dyes and intends to complete its remaining reformulations by 2027, reinforcing the shift toward natural alternatives.

As cleanliness and function continue to shape consumer expectations, companies will need clear validation for their claims and packaging that accurately conveys benefits.



TREND 2

Restructuring for Agility and Growth

Restructuring is strategic response to [economic shifts](#), volatility of ingredient cost, and the need for faster decision-making in crowded categories. Nestlé plans to [reduce its workforce by 16,000 roles](#), which represents about 6% of global employees, and aims to reach \$3.8 billion in cost reductions by 2027 as part of a larger plan to improve speed. Leadership has emphasized automation and leaner structures to support quicker evaluation, tighter performance management, and simpler operating layers.



Heineken is taking a related approach as it [removes 400 head-office roles](#) under its Evergreen 2030 strategy and consolidates business services to expand digital capability across more than 70 markets. Transitions are taking place at the CEO level at big beverage companies such as [Coca-Cola](#) and [Kraft Heinz](#), as boards prioritize structural refinement for the next phase of the market.

These changes align with a broader push across beverage companies to [direct investment toward higher-value categories](#) and reduce exposure to slower brands. [Data-driven forecasting](#) is becoming central to this shift, with digital planning systems helping organizations narrow uncertainty in demand and supply.

Consumers are also adjusting behaviors as [economic pressure](#) shapes household budgets. Higher-income shoppers continue to spend but are choosing beverages more carefully, while lower-income shoppers are cutting back as prices climb. This widening split is increasing the importance of portfolios that balance premium options with affordable alternatives.

To keep pace, companies are shortening development cycles and focusing on launches with greater potential in addition to [refining supply networks](#) to control costs. Entering 2026, firms that can reconfigure portfolios and operations with precision will be better positioned to sustain performance across varying demand patterns.



TREND 3

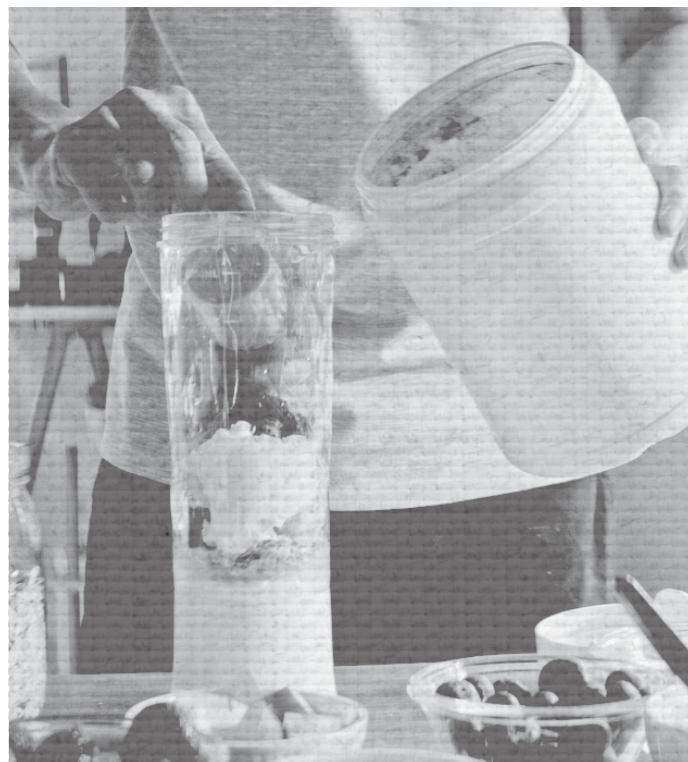
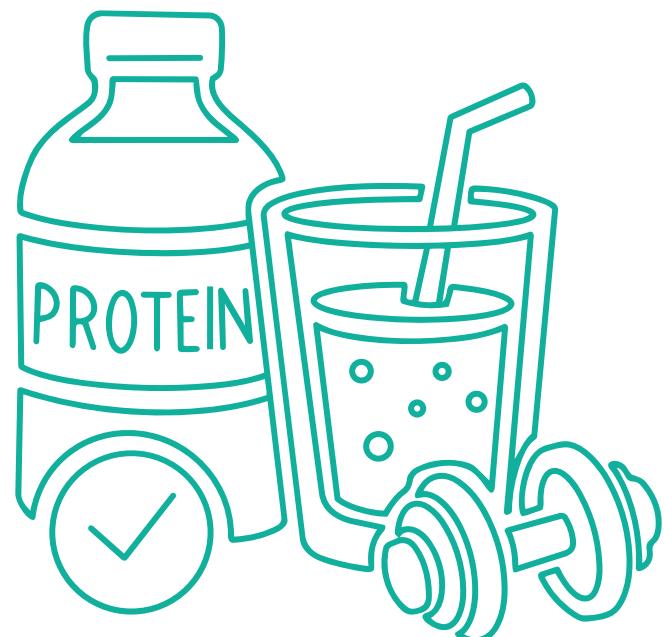
Protein Beverages Go Mainstream

Expanding beyond performance use, protein beverages are now a regular part of daily nutrition. The global ready-to-drink protein market reached \$1.96 billion in 2025 and is projected to reach [\\$2.85 billion by 2030](#) at an annual growth rate near 8%. Consumers are turning to protein to support satiety and general wellness, which is driving more interest in portable, nutrient-dense beverages.

Danone's Oikos Protein Shake demonstrates how established brands are integrating protein into broader consumption patterns. Its shelf-stable format includes [30 grams of protein, five grams of prebiotic fiber, and added vitamins](#), allowing the product to compete across morning routines and mid-day energy needs. This shift underscores how functional food brands can successfully move into new beverage categories and expand reach across channels.

PepsiCo is deepening its engagement in the category through [Muscle Milk, Propel, and Starbucks](#), which reinforces how large-scale players are accelerating protein-based innovation. Muscle Milk is transitioning toward a smoother texture and cleaner formulation while Propel Clear Protein introduces hydration focused on fiber. Starbucks is offering Protein Lattes and Protein Cold Foam beverages that deliver [15 to 36 grams of protein per 16-ounce drink](#), signaling belief that there is an opportunity to build upon consumer's attempts to incorporate protein into their daily routines.

In the upcoming year, success in this category will rely on clear nutrition information and positioning that supports a variety of lifestyle uses.



TREND 4

Packaging as a Sustainability Statement

Packaging is a critical factor in consumer choice and a core element of brand trust. [More than four out of five consumers](#) report that packaging affects their decision to try a product, and nearly three out of four say it influences whether they purchase it. This behavioral shift is moving packaging from a cost line to a strategic tool for communicating function and [sustainability](#).



Companies are investing in packaging development processes that rely on consumer testing and design research. [Conagra and B&G Foods](#) use real-world testing environments to refine packaging clarity and measure shopper response. The global beverage-packaging market is projected to [exceed \\$203 billion in 2029](#), supported by lighter materials, compostable structures, and increased recyclability. [Extended Producer Responsibility \(EPR\)](#) laws are redefining the requirements of packaging systems and prompting companies to plan for end-of-life outcomes.

Innovation is widening the range of materials and technologies available to beverage brands. [Plant-based and biodegradable](#) structures are becoming more accessible as the industry addresses sustainability expectations and product-transparency trends. Aligning packaging with clean-label formulation and functional claims is essential, reinforcing the need for a coherent product story from ingredients to materials. Companies that [elevate packaging](#) to a strategic function will be better equipped to build trust and compete on both value and visibility.



Looking Ahead

Beverage companies that enter 2026 with a commitment to simpler formulations and cohesive packaging will be positioned for stronger performance. Building flexible supply systems and accelerating development cycles will help teams respond to changing conditions and maintain relevance across varied consumer segments.

As expectations for clarity and function continue to grow, brands that can connect product integrity with operational agility will have an edge in a market shaped by shifting wellness behaviors and uneven spending patterns.

To learn more about how your beverage company can optimize in 2026, [contact Clarkston today](#).

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