

## INSIGHTS FOR CONVENIENCE STORES

# FOOD QUALITY

## KEY OPPORTUNITIES TO GAIN COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE





## A THRIVING STAPLE OF MODERN CONVENIENCE

The modern convenience store is rapidly evolving. While they continue to offer convenience for busy consumers, some brands are making a name for themselves with gleaming stores, consistently clean facilities, and fast, reliable service.

In many ways, this evolution has allowed convenience stores to become direct competition for quick service restaurants (QSRs), which have always been a go-to for on-the-run customers. However, convenience stores are often a one-stop-shop for the public, offering benefits that QSRs don't, such as fueling up their vehicles or grabbing a few household grocery essentials.

Many c-store chains have also sunk big investments leaning into food – and it's making a difference for them. For example, Casey's, a convenience store chain with more than 2,500 locations, has made a name for itself in pizza. In fact, the chain is the 5th largest pizza chain in the country.<sup>1</sup> It's differentiating itself when it comes to food quality, demonstrating real evidence that

there's a huge opportunity for c-stores to compete and win against QSRs.

Food quality is the top reason that people choose restaurants – but it's not represented on the c-store list. To understand how c-stores can improve food quality, we analyzed 180,000 food quality assessments conducted in both QSRs and convenience stores during 2023 and 2024. The analysis identified three key areas that contribute most to food quality perception: Food preparation procedures, food appearance, and time labeling for quality.

Additionally, we found a strong correlation between food quality and online review ratings, highlighting the importance of food quality in shaping a store's online reputation.

By focusing on food quality and gaining more consumer attention in this area, it's clear that c-stores could drive revenue, increase customer loyalty, and take market share away from QSRs.



## A GROWING OPPORTUNITY

Food quality has become the number one driver of consumer brand preference in the QSR space.<sup>2</sup> Notably, many consumers are already rating c-store food offerings on par with QSRs. Over half of regular c-store shoppers report that the hot food items they purchase in-store are as good as those from QSRs.<sup>3</sup>

Between 2019 and 2023, c-stores gained ground in discretionary dining categories, increasing their visit share from 24.2% to 27.1%, while QSRs saw

a slight decline from 51.8% to 50.6%.<sup>4</sup> This shift presents a significant revenue opportunity for c-stores.

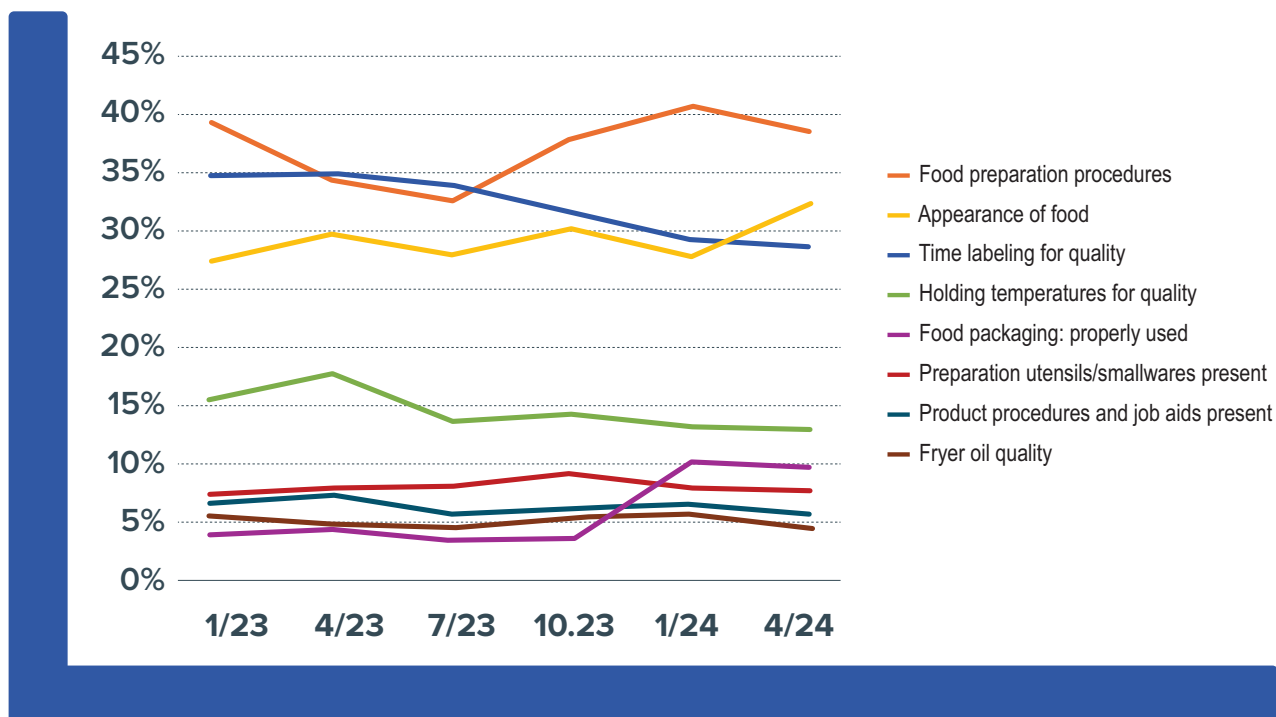
In addition to offering quick meals, c-stores provide an extra level of convenience through their broader range of products—fuel, groceries, lottery, and packaged goods. These offerings could potentially create a dramatic impact on sales when paired with high-quality food offerings.



## WHAT DO CUSTOMERS REALLY CARE ABOUT?

Food quality is influenced by countless factors, but what truly matters to your customers? They likely care more about crispy, fresh food than the exact number of pepperonis on a slice of pizza. Are your fries crispy? Do staff know how to assemble menu items properly? Are utensils readily available for customers to enjoy their meal?

To effectively compete against QSRs, it's vital to ensure your team is well-trained on the qualities that customers value. Instead of assessing every minor detail, focus on the essentials and deliver them consistently.





# THE IMPORTANCE OF ONLINE REVIEWS

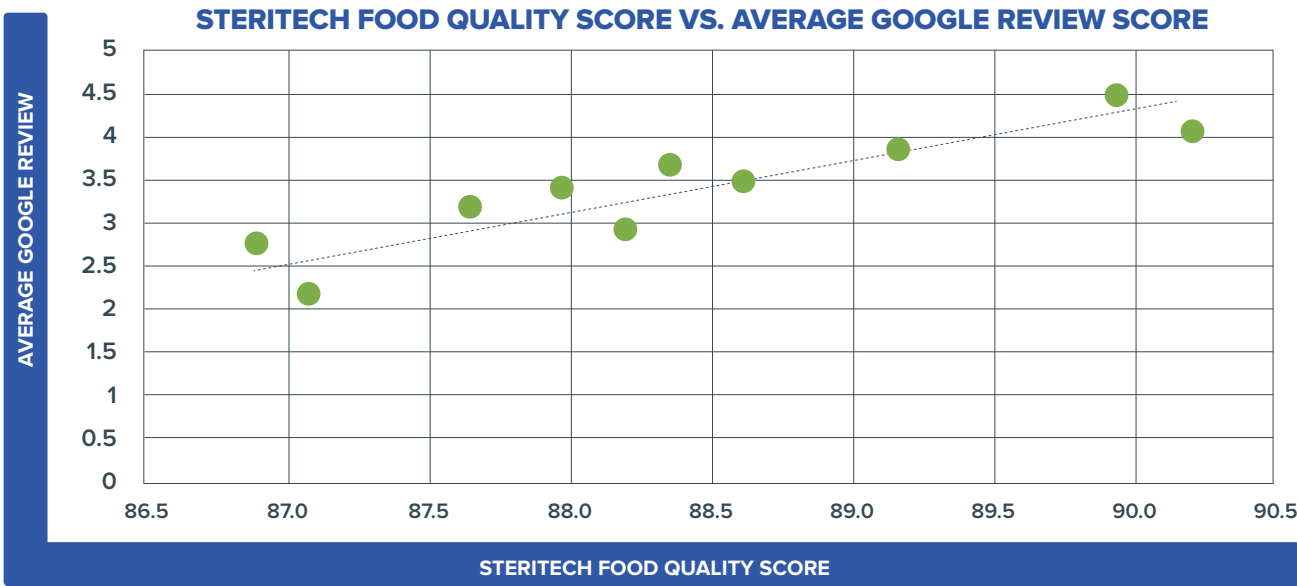
Online reviews play a critical role in shaping consumer decisions. According to data from Toast and ReviewTrackers, a substantial percentage of consumers rely on Google reviews when choosing where to eat:

- 46% of people prefer Google as their primary review platform<sup>5</sup>
- 43% would not eat at a restaurant rated below 3 - 3.5 stars<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, we found a strong correlation between Steritech Food Quality Scores and Google

review ratings for a subset of 3,000 assessments conducted within a single brand. The data suggests that restaurants scoring 88.5 or higher on Steritech’s Food Quality scale tend to receive above 3.5 stars in Google reviews.

There’s clear room for improvement—and even a half-point boost can make a noticeable difference in Google reviews. But which areas should c-stores prioritize for the biggest impact?





## WHERE TO FOCUS IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS

In our deep dive analysis of the 180,000 assessments, we isolated the top non-compliance issues in each of the three key findings.

### 1. Food Preparation Procedures

Food preparation plays a major role in food quality, with adherence to brand standards being a top concern. The most common non-compliance issues in this category include:

- Not following recipes or food prep standards
- Inconsistent food assembly (e.g., whether a pickle is served on or off the sandwich)
- Ingredient quality and freshness

### 2. Food Appearance

The appearance of food is another critical factor in food quality assessments. Key non-compliance issues in this area include:

- **Quality of bread and buns:** These items may not be toasted according to brand standards, making them a frequent issue in high-traffic stores.
- **Produce freshness:** Wilted lettuce or mealy tomatoes can severely impact the customer experience.
- **Prepared food presentation:** Ensuring food looks appetizing at all times is essential to maintaining quality.

### 3. Time Labeling for Food Quality

Maintaining the quality of food over time is crucial. The top non-compliance issues identified include:

- **Chicken product holding times:** Fried chicken can lose its crispiness if held for too long.
- **Improper handling of sides:** This includes items like fries and fresh fruit.
- **Miscalibration of product holding units,** which can affect temperature and ultimately food quality.



## BEST PRACTICES AND CORRECTIVE ACTIONS

An analysis of 22,000 corrective actions in Steritech's OnBrand360® client portal revealed five key best practices from QSRs that c-stores can adopt to help enhance food quality and improve online review scores.

- 1 Continuous training and coaching:** Reinforce brand standards to prevent off-brand behavior from becoming part of the store culture.
- 2 Follow-up and accountability:** Ensure follow-up actions after assessments to maintain compliance with procedures and identify areas for improvement.
- 3 Documentation and monitoring:** Track actions, observations, and compliance to hold staff accountable and measure progress over time.
- 4 Time management and scheduling:** Stick to schedules for tasks like baking, cooking, and checking food to ensure freshness and quality.
- 5 Strict labeling protocols:** Adhere to proper labeling practices for food holding times, ensuring expired items are never served.



This report demonstrates that as c-stores evolve to provide more restaurant-like experiences, prioritizing food preparation, presentation, and time labeling can significantly elevate the quality

of their offerings. Food quality may be subjective, but consistent focus on what customers crave and expect is the ultimate key to success.

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## SOURCES

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- 2 "[How do 13 fast-food brands rank among consumers?](#)," *Quantilope*. Accessed July 24, 2024.
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- 5 Zuluaga, Tessa. "[Should You Focus On Your Restaurant Website? 32% Of Diners Check Restaurant Websites Before Visiting](#)," *Toast*. Published 2024. Accessed July 25, 2024.
- 6 "[The Impact of Restaurant Star Ratings on Customers](#)," *Review Trackers, an InMoment Company*. Accessed on July 25, 2024.

## ABOUT STERITECH

For over 35 years, Steritech has been a trusted assessment and consulting partner that helps multi-location businesses drive operational consistency, mitigate risk, and accelerate growth.

Our 450 Specialists serve nearly 135,000 individual locations across food, retail, hospitality, and consumer services. The derived data and insights allow organizations to benchmark against best practices, improve performance, and deliver consistent, high-caliber brand experiences.

Steritech is part of Rentokil North America, a leading business services company, operating across the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico.

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