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Double-Digit Growth in Ready-to-Drink Segment Fuels Cautious Optimism for 2026 U.S. Drinks Market

Distributors invest in digital tools and premium categories as economic pressures persist and technology reshapes industry strategies.

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After a challenging year for the U.S. drinks industry in 2025, the country's leading wholesale distributors are approaching 2026 with cautious optimism. Executives from Republic National Distributing Co. (RNDC), Southern Glazer's Wine & Spirits, and Breakthru Beverage Group say they expect some stabilization in the market, but acknowledge that economic pressures on consumers will continue to affect sales.

Marc Sachs, CEO of RNDC, says he believes the coming year will mark a turning point. "We believe 2026 is where the market begins to stabilize," Sachs says. He points to moderating declines in both spirits and wine, and expects the gap between consumer purchases at retail and distributor shipments to narrow. "That's a healthier place for everyone," he adds.

Zach Poelma, senior vice president of commercial intelligence at Southern Glazer's, shares a similar outlook but remains cautious. "Our outlook for 2026 remains cautious driven primarily by the financial pressure many core consumers will continue to face," Poelma says. He also notes that the launch of oral GLP-1 drugs in 2026 could influence consumer behavior, though it is unclear what impact this will have on overall business.

Southern Glazer's projects that spirits sales, excluding ready-to-drink (RTD) products, will decline by mid-single digits this year. Including RTDs, the company expects the category to be closer to flat. On the wine side, Poelma does not anticipate any significant changes in current trends. He notes that while there has been some price and mix pressure on spirits, promotional activity is likely to increase in 2026. "Wine has actually had more favorable mix benefits for us the last 12 months than spirits," Poelma says. He expects value and volume trends in wine to align more closely in 2026.

In off-premise channels, consumers may benefit from increased promotions, which could help improve volume trends even if top-line growth remains limited. At RNDC, Sachs says the company is focusing on categories with strong growth potential such as premium spirits, agave-based products, American whiskey, and fine wine. He also highlights ongoing investments in digital tools like eRNDC and artificial intelligence capabilities that are helping suppliers and retailers gain better visibility and precision in planning.

Southern Glazer’s is also investing heavily in growth categories, particularly RTDs. The company has expanded its RTD portfolio with new additions and has seen double-digit growth in this segment over the past year. Investments in convenience channels and recent acquisitions—including an Anheuser-Busch distributor in New York and integration of Horizon business units in Massachusetts and Rhode Island—have contributed to this growth. Poelma says continued investment in digital platforms like SG Proof is driving gains for Southern Glazer’s.

Breakthru Beverage Group is taking a tailored approach to its portfolio strategy. Chief commercial officer Kevin Roberts says the company aims to keep its offerings balanced and diversified to meet a wide range of consumer preferences and occasions. Breakthru is also investing in analytics tools and business intelligence systems to identify trends early, optimize pricing strategies, and provide actionable insights to suppliers.

The three companies agree that technology investments are playing an increasingly important role across all tiers of the industry. They are using data analytics and digital platforms to respond more quickly to changing consumer preferences and market conditions.

Despite ongoing concerns about consumer spending power and broader economic uncertainty, these leading distributors are positioning themselves for growth by focusing on high-potential categories, expanding digital capabilities, and adapting their portfolios to evolving market demands. Sachs at RNDC sums up the industry’s approach: “RNDC has been successful at adapting to trends and remaining resilient during industry shifts, and I believe that puts us in a strong position to grow share in 2026.”