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What Determines Success in the Competitive Ready to Drink Market?

Market research and positioning determine whether new RTDs stand out or disappear on shelves

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The ready-to-drink (RTD) beverage market has become one of the fastest-growing segments in the global alcoholic drinks industry. In 2024, the worldwide RTD market reached an estimated value of $24.2 billion, with a 6% increase in value and a 2% rise in volume, even as overall alcohol consumption declined in many regions. This growth is driven by consumer demand for convenience, new flavors, and products that fit modern lifestyles.

RTDs are pre-mixed alcoholic beverages sold in cans or bottles, ready to be consumed without preparation. They include spirit-based cocktails, wine-based drinks like spritzers and sangria, and beer-based mixes such as radlers and shandies. The appeal lies in their ease of use: consumers can enjoy a bar-quality cocktail or refreshing drink simply by opening a can or bottle.

Three main categories define the RTD market: spirit-based, wine-based, and beer/malt-based drinks. Each offers unique business opportunities but shares the promise of convenience and innovation.

Spirit-based RTDs have led the global market, accounting for about 47-48% of total RTD sales in 2024, with revenues around $11.57 billion. These products use real distilled spirits like vodka, gin, tequila, or rum mixed with sodas or juices. Consumers are willing to pay more for authenticity and quality, favoring cocktails made with actual spirits over malt-based alternatives. In the United States, spirit-based RTDs grew by 17% in volume in 2024 alone. Brands such as High Noon have become top sellers by focusing on premium ingredients and clear branding.

However, regulatory issues affect distribution. In some U.S. states and other countries, spirit-based RTDs require special licenses and cannot be sold in regular supermarkets or convenience stores. This has led some brands to create malt- or wine-based versions for broader retail access.

Wine-based RTDs represent a smaller share—about 6-7% of the global market—but are growing quickly. In 2024, this segment generated $1.67 billion worldwide and is projected to grow at over 10% annually through 2033. Wine RTDs attract younger consumers who may find traditional wine intimidating or less convenient. Products like canned spritzers and sangria offer a lighter, more accessible way to enjoy wine, often with lower alcohol content and fruity flavors.

Inside the Business Playbook Behind the RTD Boom

For wineries, entering the RTD space can help rejuvenate their brand and reach new audiences. Wine RTDs are well-suited for mass retail channels such as supermarkets and gas stations—places where bottled wine may not sell as easily. Successful marketing focuses on simplicity, natural ingredients, and lifestyle appeal rather than technical details about grape varieties or vintages.

Beer- and malt-based RTDs make up about 45% of the global market. This category includes traditional mixes like radlers (beer with lemonade) and shandies (beer with soda), as well as hard seltzers—flavored malt beverages that saw explosive growth before facing market saturation. While hard seltzers' share of new product launches dropped from one-third in 2021 to just 11% in 2024, classic beer mixes have regained popularity. In the U.S., radler/shandy sales rose by 28% last year.

For breweries, offering RTDs helps diversify their portfolio and retain customers who might otherwise switch to sweeter or lighter drinks. Beer RTDs also help combat seasonality; while lemon-flavored beers are popular in summer, new flavors can extend sales throughout the year.

To succeed in the competitive RTD market, producers must develop clear business strategies:

Market research is essential before launching an RTD product. Companies should identify local trends—such as preferred flavors or alcohol levels—and analyze competitors to find gaps in the market.

Choosing the right base (spirit, wine, or malt) depends on both production capabilities and legal considerations. Regulatory frameworks may limit where certain types of RTDs can be sold.

Positioning is critical: brands must decide whether to target premium segments with higher prices and quality claims or aim for mainstream appeal with accessible pricing.

Distribution should be omnichannel—covering supermarkets, convenience stores, online platforms, bars, restaurants, and even vending machines where regulations allow.

Strategic partnerships can help smaller producers gain access to new markets or co-create products with established brands.

Operational capacity must be scalable; successful products may require rapid increases in production volume and consistent supply chains for ingredients.

Compliance with labeling laws and alcohol regulations is mandatory. Producers should also consider offering low- or no-alcohol versions to align with health trends and responsible drinking campaigns.

Marketing plays a decisive role in building an RTD brand:

Packaging design must be eye-catching and communicate clearly what the product is—a crucial factor when consumers make quick decisions at retail shelves or online.

Storytelling helps connect with target audiences by associating the drink with specific lifestyles—be it social gatherings, outdoor activities, or relaxation after work.

Sampling events and trial packs encourage first-time purchases; once consumers try a product they like, repeat sales are more likely.

Highlighting health-related attributes such as low calories or natural ingredients can attract wellness-focused buyers—but transparency is key to maintaining trust.

Pricing strategies should reflect product positioning; premium offerings need clear justification for higher prices through quality claims or unique features.

Digital marketing is indispensable: social media campaigns featuring influencers or user-generated content can quickly build buzz around a new RTD brand. Online sales channels provide direct access to consumers and valuable data for future marketing efforts.

The rise of RTDs reflects broader changes in how people consume alcoholic beverages—favoring convenience, variety, and experiences that fit their lifestyles. For wineries, distilleries, and breweries willing to innovate while maintaining quality standards, the RTD segment offers significant growth potential despite its challenges. Success depends on understanding consumer needs, differentiating products through authentic branding and flavor innovation, ensuring reliable distribution across multiple channels, and executing effective marketing strategies that resonate with today’s drinkers.