

Steritech

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INSIGHTS FOR CONVENIENCE STORES

CLEANLINESS

KEY OPPORTUNITIES TO INCREASE
BRAND LOYALTY AND DRIVE SALES





A THRIVING STAPLE OF MODERN CONVENIENCE

In North America, the modern convenience store (c-store) is rapidly evolving. While these stores continue to offer convenience for busy consumers, some brands are making a name for themselves with gleaming stores, rabid customer loyalty, and craveable food.

In many ways, this evolution has allowed c-stores to become direct competition for quick service restaurants (QSRs), which have always been a go-to for on-the-run customers. However, c-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.

Yet, when it comes to earning customer visits, one area where QSRs continue to outperform c-stores is cleanliness. Whether it's the store itself, the bathroom, or behind-the-scenes in food preparation areas, cleanliness matters to consumers when choosing a location to stop and shop. InTouch Insights found that 53% of c-store shoppers consider it a "crucial factor" when selecting a c-store.¹ Other surveys also indicate that consumers are more

likely to spend money in businesses with clean restrooms.² In restaurants, multiple surveys have found that customers equate restroom cleanliness with kitchen cleanliness. Whether or not there is an actual correlation is up for debate, but this may hold true for c-stores as well.

There may be more critical food safety areas where c-stores are under-performing. In a 2022 Steritech blind assessment study of 80 c-stores from 5 national and regional brands, we found that 23% of locations were missing soap and paper towels. To answer the question of whether or not c-stores actually have more cleanliness issues than QSRs, Steritech performed multiple data analyses of over 450,000 assessments conducted over the last 2 years across 30 different client brands: 23 of those brands were QSRs, 7 were c-stores.

The outcome of our analysis was that yes, c-stores average about 150% more cleanliness findings than QSRs. However, what we found may provide a roadmap for c-stores looking to elevate their cleanliness initiatives and outshine their QSR competition.

THE QSR LEAN TOWARD COMPLIANCE

Comparing QSR assessments and c-store assessments is not apples-to-apples. QSRs typically place a stronger emphasis on compliance, which often results in a more comprehensive and rigorous assessment program compared to c-stores.

QSR brands also tend to have more frequent visits. For QSRs, the average number of visits per year is 2.66, whereas c-stores average about 1.92. Why does that matter? Over our 35+ years leading assessments, Steritech has found that peak improvement occurs when a location has 4 assessments per year – up to a 1.5x reduction in total findings over those getting only one assessment annually.

Another notable difference is among Steritech QSR clients, a typical assessment often includes food safety and operational excellence programs, giving us a larger data set from which to pull. Among our c-store clients, the tendency is for programs to be more focused on food safety only.



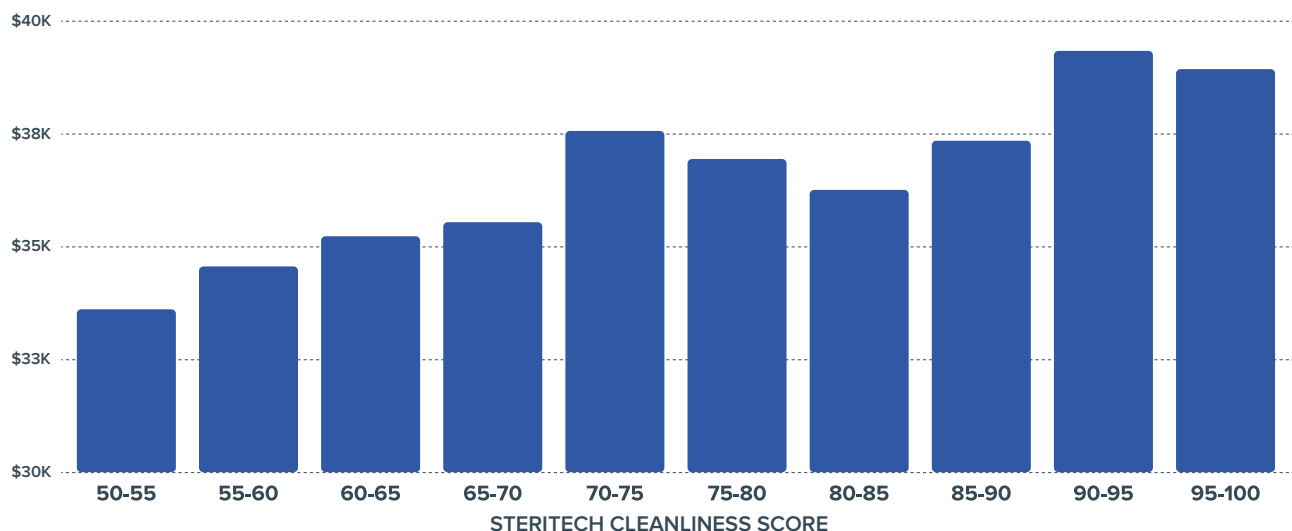
THE CLEANLINESS-SALES CORRELATION

Do customers really spend more money and return more often to clean locations?

Steritech's data seems to indicate that among QSRs, cleaner locations have higher sales. We looked at 4,000 client assessments performed in 2024 and correlated those results with average location sales. What we found was a very strong correlation between overall cleanliness scores and average restaurant sales.

Using industry averages, we know that a typical fast-casual restaurant generates approximately \$1.96 million in annual sales. Based on a strong correlation between cleanliness and sales in one restaurant brand, we observed that a 5-point improvement in cleanliness scores results in an estimated weekly sales increase of \$506.12 per restaurant. This translates to an additional \$26,318 in annual revenue per restaurant.

RESTAURANT AVERAGE WEEKLY SALES VS STERITECH CLEANLINESS SCORE

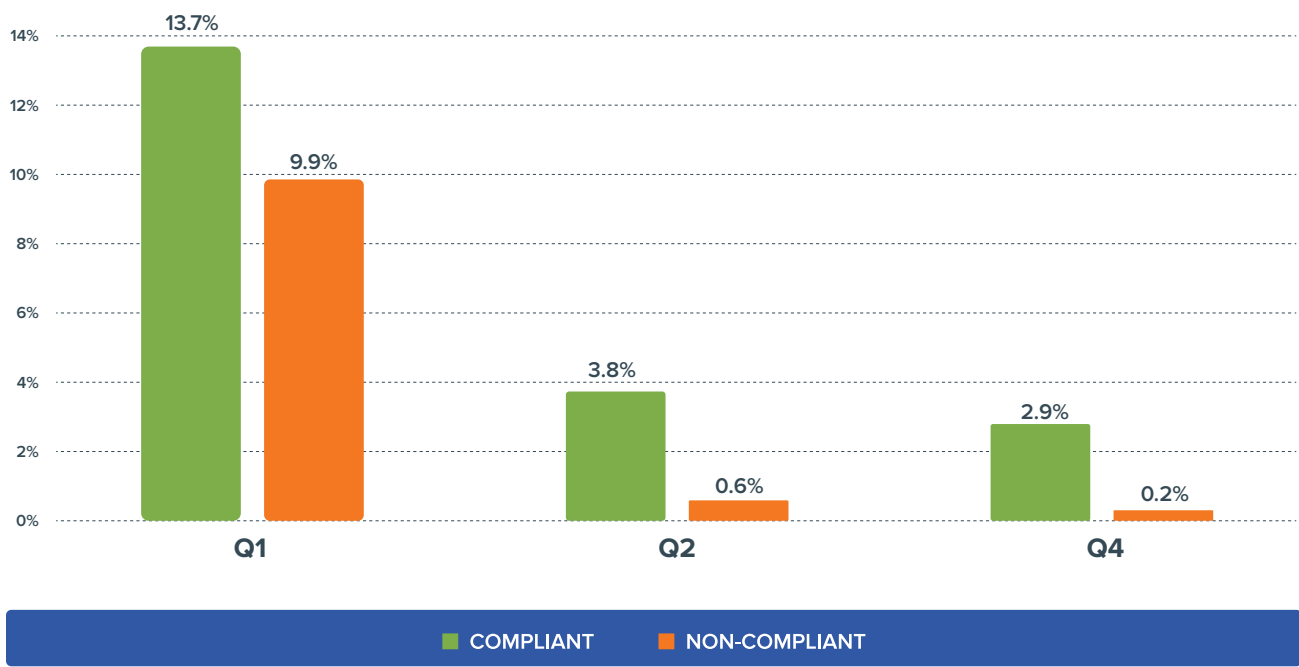




The correlation is even stronger when looking at back-of-house cleanliness. A separate analysis of a major national QSR brand in 2022 and 2023 revealed that QSRs with higher compliance in back-of-house equipment cleanliness experienced greater year-over-year sales growth.

Of course, customers don't see the back-of-house in many QSRs, so how can cleanliness in this area be correlated with sales? Steritech finds that restaurants that emphasize back-of-house cleanliness are also highly likely to prioritize front-of-house cleanliness, which IS customer-facing.

2022 VS 2023 ANNUAL SALES GROWTH COMPARED TO EQUIPMENT CLEANLINESS COMPLIANCE





OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT: WHERE TO FOCUS

So, where do c-stores begin when looking at their locations? Knowing where to focus your energies may help you drive rapid improvements in actual cleanliness, as well as customer perceptions of cleanliness.

In our 450,000 assessment analysis, we analyzed every single opportunity observed—over 4.5 million findings — and then normalized the observations across all the different brands and standards to group them into categories of findings. Take a look at the top 3 areas in your locations; do they ring true?



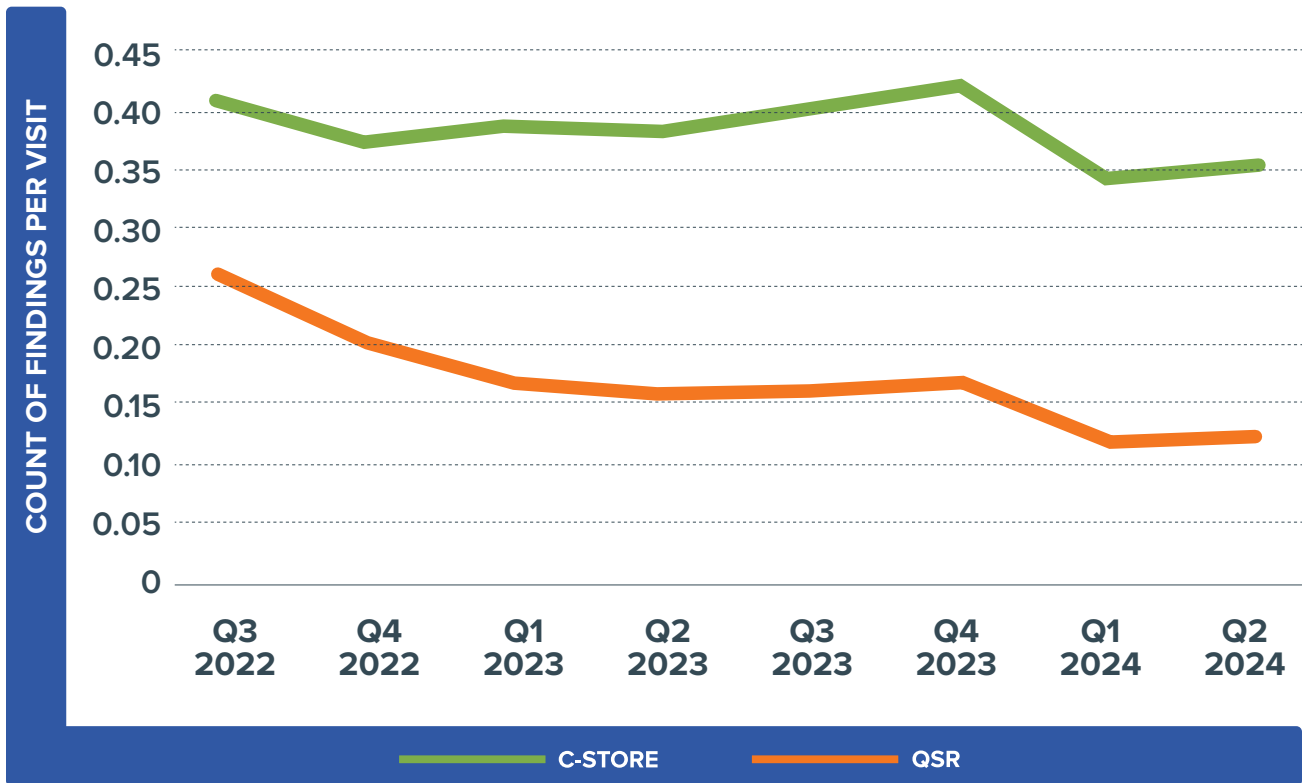
CLEANLINESS OF FOOD CONTACT SURFACES

This area is a food safety concern for both QSRs and c-stores.

While the prevalence of incidents has slowly declined over the last two years for both verticals, it remains a more frequent issue for c-stores.

What are food contact surfaces in c-stores?

- Beverage equipment – this includes dispenser nozzles, mixer parts, coffee dispensers, etc.
- Can opener blades
- Food slicers
- Ice machine/chutes



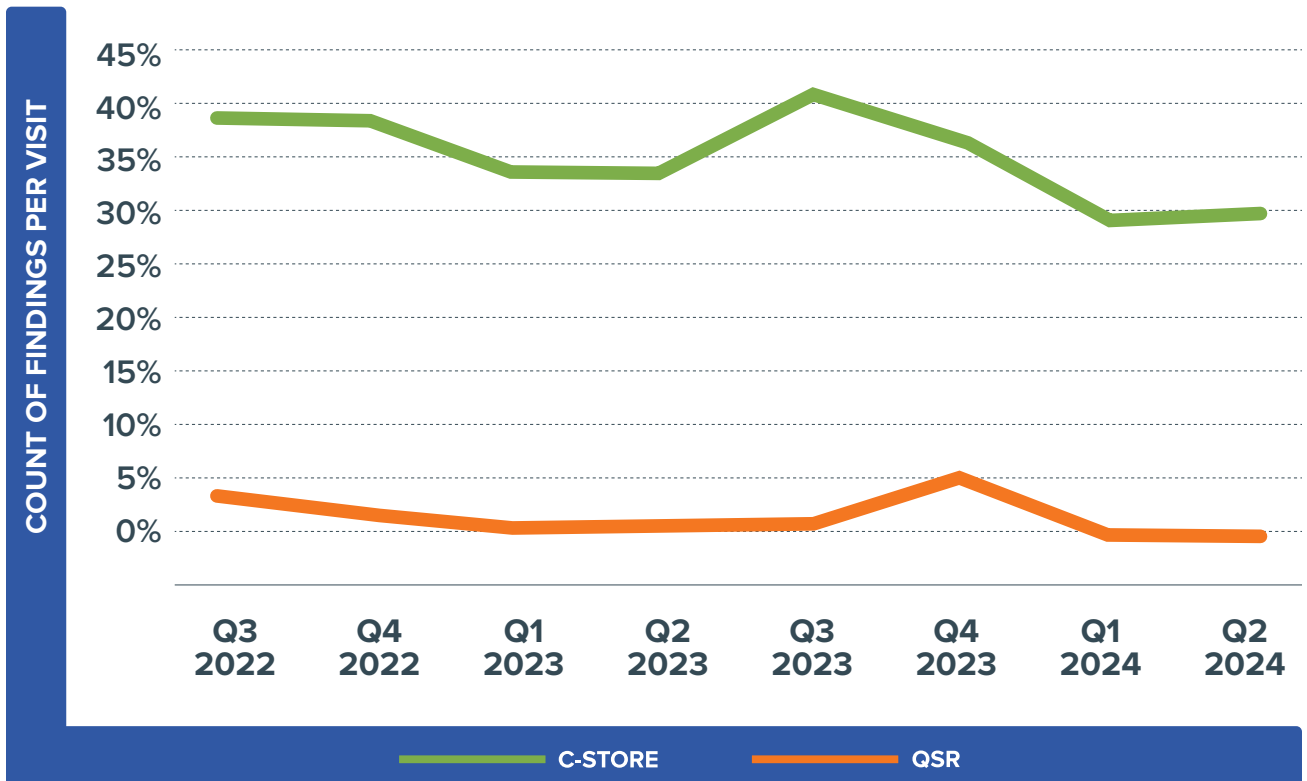


CLEANLINESS OF NON-FOOD CONTACT SURFACES

While it may seem unusual to those not involved in food safety daily, the cleanliness of non-food contact surfaces is crucial in food environments. Pathogens on these surfaces can easily transfer to food and food contact surfaces, as they are often located close to one another. Additionally, food handlers frequently touch non-food contact surfaces and then food contact surfaces in quick succession, often without even realizing it.

Examples of these surfaces in c-stores include:

- Equipment gaskets
- Shelving
- Screens and registers
- Buttons, knobs, and dials
- Handles (door, cooler, etc.)



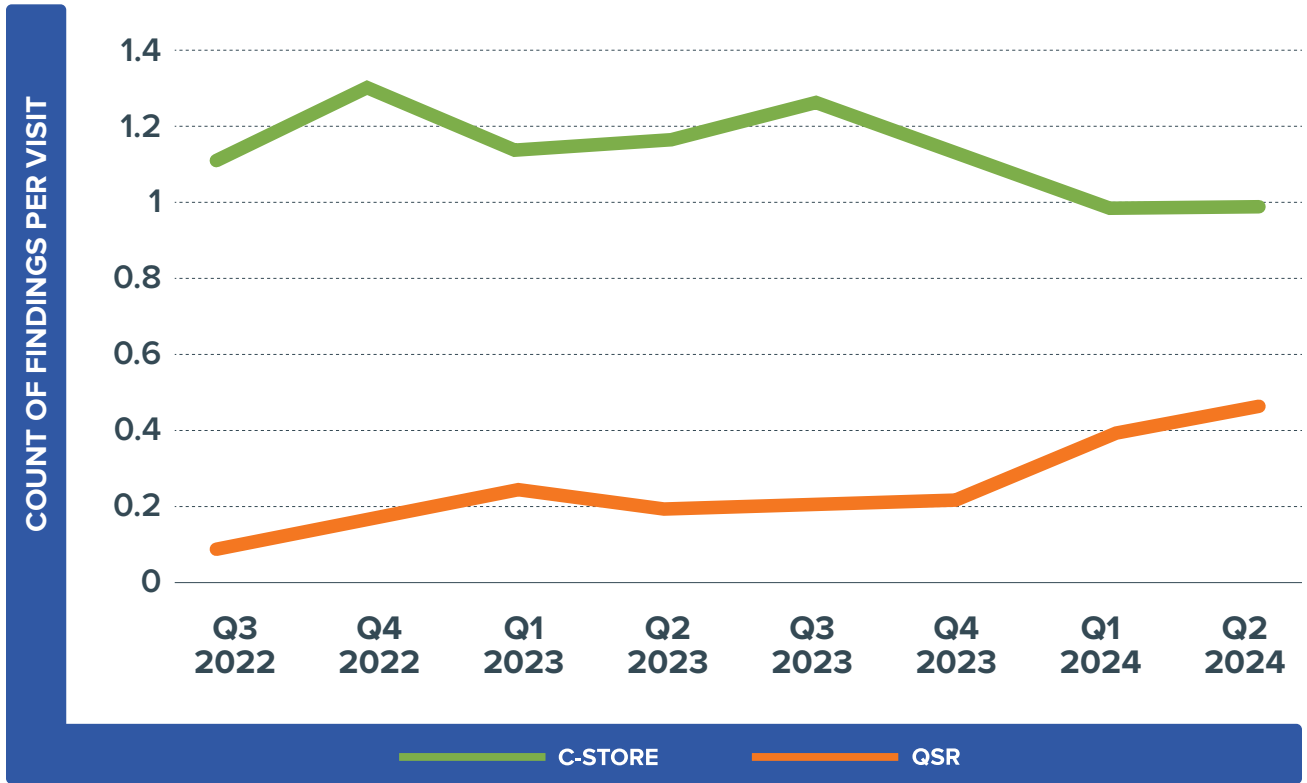


GENERAL FACILITY CLEANLINESS

One area where c-stores are closing the gap is in general facility cleanliness. This line item typically includes the overall cleanliness of floors, walls, and ceilings in a facility. Why does that matter? The cleanliness of these areas is critical to preventing cross-contamination.

Spots that get missed more often include:

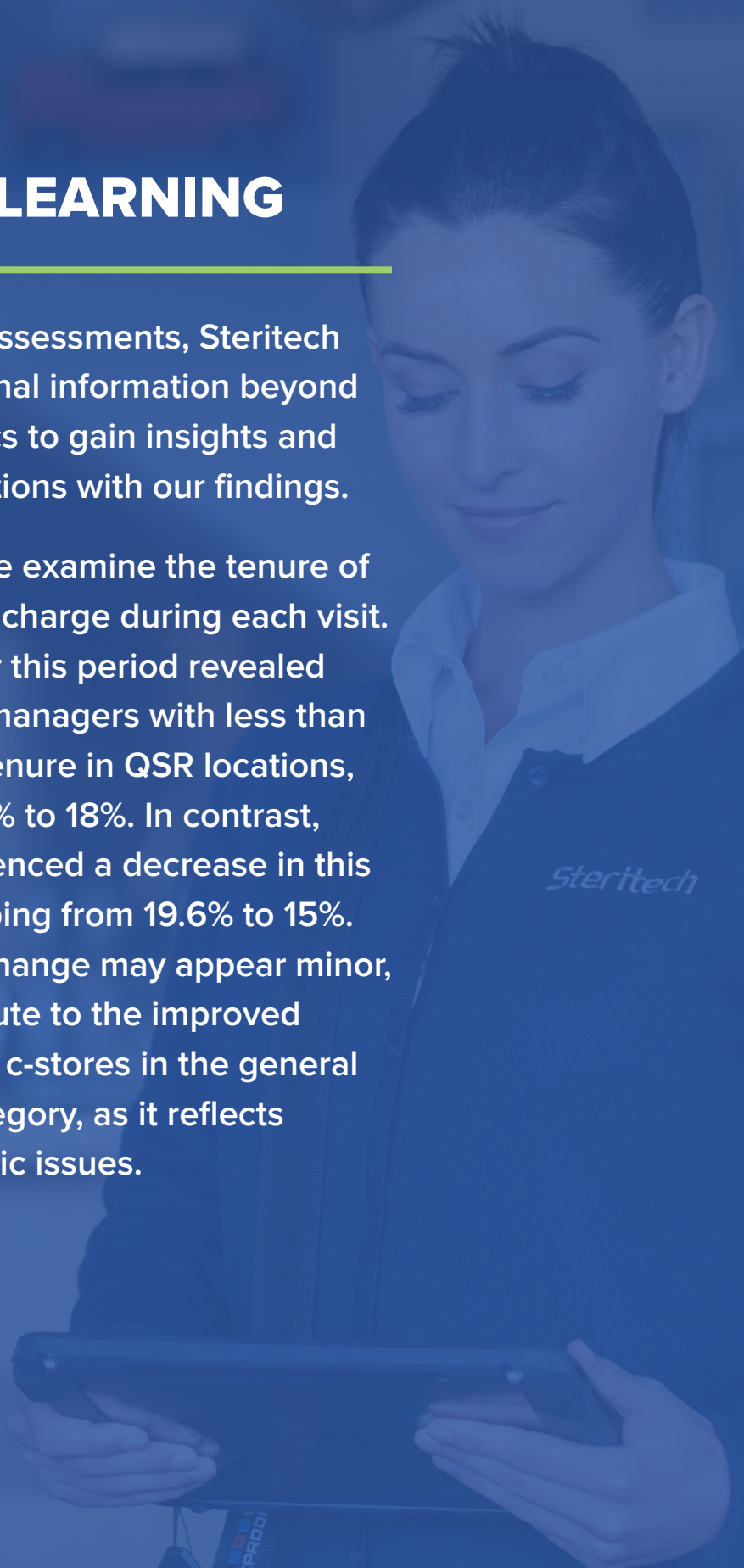
- Under heavy equipment (reach in coolers, gondolas, etc.)
- Ceiling vents and fans
- Walls near around beverage stations



DEEPER LEARNING

As part of our assessments, Steritech collects additional information beyond standard metrics to gain insights and identify correlations with our findings.

For instance, we examine the tenure of the manager in charge during each visit. Our analysis for this period revealed an increase in managers with less than six months of tenure in QSR locations, rising from 11.5% to 18%. In contrast, c-stores experienced a decrease in this category, dropping from 19.6% to 15%. Although this change may appear minor, it could contribute to the improved performance of c-stores in the general cleanliness category, as it reflects broader systemic issues.



6 BEST PRACTICES TO HELP DRIVE CLEANLINESS IMPROVEMENT

C-stores can take valuable lessons from QSRs to improve food safety, enhance customer experience, and gain other benefits. To pinpoint the most effective actions taken by QSR locations, Steritech analyzed 25,000 documented cleanliness Corrective Action Plans from 2024, uncovering key trends and the most impactful solutions.

- 1 Scheduled routine cleaning:** Implement strict daily and weekly cleaning schedules.

Example: Ensure all critical areas, including gaskets, nozzles, and food contact surfaces are cleaned regularly as part of a scheduled routine, and at the appropriate frequency

- 2 Preventative maintenance programs:** Establish ongoing maintenance programs to prevent cleanliness issues before they arise.

Example: Inspect the condenser in the walk-in cooler. If you notice a heavy layer of dust caked on the coils at the back, it can lead to cleanliness issues on the fan guards and force the unit to work harder, increasing the risk of failure.

- 3 Immediate corrective actions:** Develop a culture that enforces immediate response plans for identified cleanliness issues.

Actionable steps: Train staff to take immediate corrective actions when cleanliness issues are identified, followed by documenting and reporting these actions. It's important to build a culture around quickly addressing simple cleaning tasks.

- 4 Root cause analysis for persistent issues:** Conduct thorough investigations to identify the root cause of recurring cleanliness problems.

Actionable steps: Analyze patterns of cleanliness issues, identify underlying causes, and implement long-term solutions to prevent recurrence.

Example: If a particular area frequently fails cleanliness checks, investigate why and take steps to address the root cause.

- 5 Comprehensive Training Programs:** Ensure all staff are thoroughly trained in food safety and cleanliness protocols.

This is one of the most common analyses we conduct across our brands. Steritech consistently observes strong correlations between locations that complete the training and higher scores across all assessments.

- 6 Oversight Program:** Institute third-party food safety or operational excellence oversight programs to help provide an unbiased picture of conditions at all locations.



Understanding the challenges faced by QSRs can be invaluable for c-stores seeking to enhance their market share. By prioritizing cleanliness and creating a more pleasant shopping experience, c-stores can effectively demonstrate to customers that they offer not only convenience but also a commitment

to quality. Cleanliness isn't just a "nice to have"; it's essential for attracting new customers and fostering loyalty. As the competitive landscape evolves, investing in cleanliness may be the key to standing out and thriving in a market increasingly focused on customer experience.

SOURCES

1 Ulie, Chuck. "[Cleanliness, Ambiance Growing in Importance for Convenience-Store Consumers, Report Shows.](#)" *CSP Daily News*. Published June 14, 2024. Accessed July 19, 2024.

2 "[Survey: Clean Restrooms Can Increase In-Store Sales.](#)" *Convenience Store News*. Published May 23, 2023. Accessed July 19, 2024.

3 "[Convenience Store Brand Experience: Expectation vs. Execution.](#)" *Steritech*. Published November 2022.

4 Maze, Jonathan. "[These Restaurant Chains Have the Highest Average Unit Volumes.](#)" *Restaurant Business*. Published July 17, 2024. Accessed October 17, 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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