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Levin Management Survey: Retailers Enter 2026 Optimistic as Inflation and Consumer Confidence Top Concerns

LMC's 15th Annual Retail Outlook Sentiment Survey points to steady 2025 performance and growing focus on technology-driven efficiency

NORTH PLAINFIELD, N.J. (Feb. 03, 2026) — Levin Management Corporation's (LMC) 15th annual Retail Outlook Sentiment Survey finds store managers heading into 2026 with optimism, while keeping a close watch on consumer confidence, inflation and labor costs. When asked how they expect their location will perform in 2026, 68.6% of respondents said it will perform much better or somewhat better. The economy and consumer confidence (71.3%) and inflation and rising costs (69.4%) ranked as the top factors expected to impact business in 2026, followed by labor availability and labor costs (36.1%).

“2026 is shaping up as a year where execution will matter more than ever,” said Matthew K. Harding, chief executive officer at Levin Management Corporation. “With consumers focused on value, retailers are doubling down on fundamentals — strong service, tight inventory discipline and technology that improves efficiency in the store.”

This year’s results also point to shifting priorities at the store level, with technology-driven adaptations, including AI and automation, rising to the top (40.9%) as retailers focus on controllable levers that improve efficiency and day-to-day execution.

Key findings:

- 68.6% expect their location will perform much better or somewhat better in 2026.
- 71.9% reported holiday sales were the same or higher; 65.3% said results met or exceeded expectations.
- 64.3% reported total 2025 sales were the same or higher than 2024, and 65.3% said traffic was higher or unchanged.
- Economy/consumer confidence (71.3%) and inflation/rising costs (69.4%) top expected 2026 impacts.
- Technology (AI/automation/payments) leads planned adaptations (40.9%).
- In-person customer service and support ranks as the top brick-and-mortar advantage (39.8%).

Holiday performance and expectations:

Coming out of the 2025 holiday season, 71.9% said holiday sales were the same or higher, while 17.4% reported lower sales. In addition, 65.3% said holiday sales met or exceeded expectations, while 25.6% said results fell below expectations.

Full-year sales and traffic:

For the full year, 64.3% reported total 2025 sales were the same or higher than 2024, and 65.3% said traffic was higher or unchanged.

Pricing outlook:

Over the past year, 24.1% reported no price increases in response to inflation, while 38.8% said prices rose under 10%, reflecting a trend toward modest adjustments rather than broad price hikes. Looking ahead, 35.5% said they anticipate raising prices further in 2026, while 44.9% said they are not sure, underscoring uncertainty around costs and consumer response.

Hiring and growth plans:

Hiring remained active, with 42.6% saying they are currently hiring. While major store reinvestment plans were limited, some retailers are still pursuing selective growth, with about one-quarter planning to open additional locations and many still undecided.

Operational adaptations and the in-store advantage:

On operations, 43.0% said they have made adaptations recently or plan to do so in the near future. Among those, technology investments such as AI, automation and payments led the list (40.9%), followed by customer experience and training (34.8%) and loyalty and promotions (34.8%).

“Our survey shows technology has quickly become the most common adaptation retailers are prioritizing, from AI and automation to payments and other tools that help teams work faster and serve customers better,” said Melissa Sievwright, vice president of marketing and corporate communications at Levin Management Corporation. “Retailers are looking for practical technology that strengthens day-to-day execution and supports customer service at the store level.”

When asked to choose the single primary advantage of brick-and-mortar retail, store managers most often selected in-person customer service and support (39.8%), followed by the social experience of in-person shopping (17.6%), brand- and loyalty-building capabilities (15.7%), product discovery (13%) and the convenience of getting it now (9.3%).

Overall, the findings suggest retailers are entering 2026 with steady demand but heightened price sensitivity, placing a premium on operational discipline, service and technology that improves execution.

LMC will conduct its next Retail Sentiment Survey in June, focusing on midyear performance and technology trends.

Methodology:

LMC's 15th annual Retail Outlook Sentiment Survey collected input from retail and restaurant store managers and operators across LMC-managed retail properties. The survey assessed sales and traffic performance, expectations for 2026, pricing actions, hiring and growth plans, operational adaptations, and perceived advantages of brick-and-mortar retail.

North Plainfield, N.J.-based Levin Management Corporation (LMC) is a full-service commercial real estate services firm with more than 70 years of experience. The company's portfolio includes approximately 125 properties totaling 16 million square feet across the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic, primarily focused on grocery-anchored open-air retail centers. LMC provides leasing, property management, construction, accounting and financial reporting, marketing, and acquisition/disposition consulting, delivering tailored strategies to maximize asset value for institutional and private owners.

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[About Levin Management Corporation \(LMC\)](#)

975 Highway 22, North Plainfield, New Jersey 07060

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For more information, visit www.levinmgt.com and follow us on [LinkedIn](#)

Media Contact:

Melissa Sievwright

Vice President, Marketing & Corporate Communications

Levin Management Corporation

Phone: (908) 226-5275 (direct line)

Mobile: (908) 821-7442

Email: msievwright@levinmgt.com