



## Agent of change

For Jeff Doucette, general manager, Field Agent Canada, innovation is in the details

Jeff Doucette has deep roots in the convenience business. His parents operated several convenience and gas sites in the Halifax area, where he worked until graduating university and moving to Toronto. After cutting his teeth in CPG—at Unilever one of his first accounts was the Ontario Korean Businessmen’s Association—and running his own consultancy, he joined Field Agent Canada, which provides retail audit, mystery shopping and mobile research services through a smartphone app platform and network of more than 153,000 “agents” who are the company’s eyes and ears on the ground, collecting data for retail operations. Doucette, who is now based in Calgary, shared his observations and insights about on-shelf availability, creating traffic flow and charting the future of convenience.

PHOTO BY COLIN WAY



**Your background provides a unique window into retail, particularly convenience. With that in mind, what's your general take on the convenience store business today?**

**JD:** It's a long time ago now—my parents have been retired for about 20 years—but that retail experience has been very useful throughout my career. On a macro level, the very idea of convenience is changing—it's not just around the corner, now it's going to be delivered to your couch. When I was working for L'Oréal, I travelled a lot in Asia and there, even the little convenience stores would deliver a bottle of Coke around the corner. It's interesting to think about the professionalization of this now—you have a big chain approach with apps and delivery services, but then the independent retailer needs to find their niche in that space.

**It feels like the pandemic is reshaping consumer expectations and habits in an accelerated way. How do you see this disrupting convenience?**

**JD:** Think about the big, traditional categories. With lottery, for instance, despite convenience stores staying open, in-person sales were very difficult because people weren't out and about as much. Here in Alberta, we have Play Alberta now and, honestly, I just buy my tickets on my app because I see the ad and I'm like, "Oh yeah, there's a draw tonight." The lotto industry had to react to the pandemic and that may have structurally changed how lotto is done for a huge part of the population. And that's eliminating a trip to the convenience store. We're seeing that across a bunch of categories. Look at what's happening in the UK where they're talking about junk food taxes. With COVID and the understanding that one of the big comorbidities is obesity, there's going to be more scrutiny on what people eat. What does that mean for convenience? It can't just be about treats and sugary drinks—there needs to be balance. We were already starting to see (better-for-you) products, menu innovation and fresh grab-and-go items. I expect we'll see more of that.

**With so much change happening so quickly, it's hard for operators to know where to focus. What's your advice?**

**JD:** It comes down to the ability to know your neighbourhood. There will be lots of neighbourhoods where the traditional convenience store stuff works, but as areas gentrify, as new developments come in, it's important to observe what's happening around you. If five bubble tea stores pop up around your store, maybe your milkshake machine isn't the right fit. People are looking for other things. The standardized assortment is one thing that makes the chains efficient, but it's also a really big opportunity for the independents to say, "Yeah, but I know my shoppers. I know them by name. I know what they want and I'm willing to bring in the things that they want to buy." There's a store here next to a gym and it's the perfect opportunity to sell coconut water or whatever people drink or eat after working out. Or there's another one that's really close to a doggy daycare with tons of pet traffic—tap into that. The real, sustainable innovation for convenience stores is being intimately knowledgeable about their community.



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**What are you noticing when it comes to Field Agent's shelf evaluations?**

**JD:** We're doing a lot of work around on-shelf availability. It's inconvenient if your supermarket doesn't have what you want, but it really defeats the purpose of a convenience store if your convenience store doesn't have what you want. One of the challenges I find with convenience operations is that a lot of cold vaults have one row of every item, then at the end of the day, you've sold out of your top-selling products. The on-shelf availability piece is huge right across the board because there's a drive to have an assortment that includes everything and every new innovative product, but I don't know if that's the right move. Make sure that you're always in stock of those key items.

**That can be a challenge these days—some retailers are having trouble sourcing products.**

**JD:** Yes, one of the big things is the supply chain

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issue. If it comes from China, there'll be a bottleneck and a lot of stuff is late already. It's going to be tricky trying to manage inventories and build seasonal items appropriately—I think it's going to be bumpy, whether it's stuff that's made in Canada or from overseas.

**What can operators do to mitigate the fallout from these category shifts and supply issues?**

**JD:** Lidl [discount chain in Europe and the U.S.] does a great job of offering a limited hot deal that creates a bit of a frenzy. Convenience stores can do this, too—offer something that isn't a convenience store item, but it gets people into your store, and it has this excitement because it's limited and only available while supplies last. That type of demand creation is needed because you've got less trips from a lotto, less trips from gas, those types of things. What else can bring traffic to the store?

**When it comes to in-store, are you noticing any pandemic-inspired trends that are going to stick?**

**JD:** We're seeing more decluttering of stores so that people can navigate and see. I always say the Wawa format in the Southeast U.S. would do amazing in Canada. It's almost the perfect blend of convenience and foodservice; the stores are bright and modern and spacious. They could have built it on 60% of the footprint, but they didn't. It gives you a lot of room to move around and the layout of the store creates traffic flow.

**How do you see convenience stores evolving?**

**JD:** General stores are quaint. They're quaint and they're an attraction—you see hipsters buying different stores now and turning them into a local food haven or whatever. But convenience stores stuck in the '90s are not quaint. There are a lot of stores that are stuck in a rut—that includes chains and independents. The channel needs to evolve to stay relevant. Think of that old, really worn adage of 'play to where the puck is going to be.' It's not about catching up; it's about asking what's going to be convenient a decade from now when we're all driving electric cars and we all order stuff online and there's a soda tax or whatever those things might be. Based on where we are going, what will consumers want? As an industry, we need to be asking, where should convenience be 10 or 15 years from now? Let's start going there. [CSNC](#)