

B-well's 'Buy only what you need' refill model gains traction in townships

As households continue to feel the strain of rising living costs, B-well has begun rolling out a flexible cooking oil refill model in selected township stores.



Image supplied

With cooking oil prices still around 4% higher year-on-year in February 2026, basic staples remain increasingly out of reach for many families. In response, the brand's new Smartfill initiative gives shoppers the ability to buy smaller, more affordable quantities - an option fast gaining traction among cash-constrained consumers.

Township spaza shops often provide the earliest signs of shifting buying behaviour, and the latest data reflects this clearly. Informal traders play a central role in how many township households buy their everyday

essentials.

These businesses form a major part of the broader township economy, which is estimated to generate more than R900bn annually and is largely sustained through frequent, small-value purchases made at informal outlets such as spaza shops and street-based traders

“Households are under pressure, and you can see that in the way people shop,” says Morne Botes, commercial director of Southern Oil.

“Instead of buying a full bottle of oil, many customers are choosing to refill only what they need for a few days. It’s a pattern that’s becoming more common, especially where money must stretch from week to week. Refills give people control over how much they spend in that moment.”

Buying only what they need

A recent Southern Oil report shows that B-well cooking oil now accounts for 17.4% of refill-dispenser sales. While still in a pilot phase, this level of uptake suggests shoppers are not only open to the concept, but increasingly reliant on it.

“One of the key behaviours we’re seeing is that around one in three shoppers ultimately buy a different brand at the dispenser than they intended,” says Botes.

“This isn’t always about brand switching - often it’s a real-time decision based on budget and quantity. Many still stick to the brand they know, which shows that convenience and choice drive the behaviour more than loyalty. For a lot of families, buying a full bottle mid-month just isn’t realistic, but buying half - or even less - is manageable.”

Early signs of habit-forming behaviour

The data points to repeat use as a standout indicator.

Month-on-month growth in both sales and transactions suggests the refill model is becoming part of everyday shopping routines rather than a novelty.

In busy township stores where customers frequently top up small essentials, the Smartfill approach aligns naturally with existing behavioural patterns.

While affordability is the primary driver, the model also offers an environmental advantage: reduced single-use plastic. If scaled, the impact on plastic-waste reduction could be substantial.

“For B-well, this aligns with our broader efforts to support healthier, more sustainable food choices. Products like B-well Omega-3 cooking oil already reflect that direction, and Smartfill adds another dimension to it,” says Botes.

Flexibility that meets shoppers where they are

Though still in its early stages, the pilot points to a clear conclusion: when given flexible purchasing options, shoppers use them. “People know exactly what they can afford at any given time,” concludes Botes.

“If you give them an option that helps them manage their money without sacrificing quality, it absolutely makes sense in this market - and they take it.”

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