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Industry Leaders on Academic Collaboration, 24/7 Operations, EVs, Labor, Tariffs, and AI

CLVG VISION REPORT No. 11
SEPTEMBER 2025

FEATURED SPEAKER



Robert Hampton
Director, Strategic Growth and
Initiatives, Vision Group Network



sharing today to shape tomorrow



We are Convenience Leaders Vision Group (CLVG), a group of invited leaders of the convenience industry who has volunteered our time to help our fellow retailers, solution providers and product suppliers. The only reason we gather is to discuss, debate and share our experiences and ideas. Each of us is offering our personal opinions. We are not looking for “group think” — we are promoting problem solving and looking to the future. We make our conversations available to everyone in the industry through CLVG Vision Reports. These reports will help you better understand current challenges, solutions, and opportunities while giving you access to different opinions and perspectives, regardless of the size of your business.

Convenience Leaders Vision Group is part of the Vision Group Network, whose mission is to gather the best minds in the industry, put them in a virtual room, and let the ideas and opinions develop.

This **CLVG Vision Report** is comprised of multiple parts:

CLVG Views is a summary of the conversation with additional resources.

The **full meeting transcript** and the **presentation recording** and **slides** are online and searchable by topics. We include the full transcript so that you can be in the room with us, rather than only having access to selected quotes and paraphrasing.

The main topics in this CLVG Vision Report:

VGN Academic Partnerships

- **Capstone Projects Create Mutual Successes**
 - **Hackathons for Innovation**
 - **Workforce Development and Talent Pipelines**
 - **Innovation and Practical Challenges**
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Taking Pulse of the Convenience Industry Leaders

- **The 24-Hour Store Format**
 - **EV Charging**
 - **Labor and Workforce**
 - **Tariff Implications and Effects of the One Big Beautiful Bill**
 - **AI Implementation in the Past Twelve Months**
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CLVG VIEWS

A CONVENIENCE LEADERS
VISION GROUP DISCUSSION

Industry Leaders on Academic Collaboration, 24/7 Operations, EVs, Labor, Tariffs, and AI

This meeting of the Convenience Leaders Vision Group (CLVG) sought the input of CLVG members on a variety of topics on operations, technology, and future investment.

The CLVG quarterly meeting, held on August 27, 2025, was facilitated by Vision Group Network (VGN) Co-Founders **Myra Kressner**, CEO of Kressner Strategy Group and **Roy Strasburger**, CEO of StrasGlobal, president of Compliance Safe. The meeting featured a short presentation by **Robert Hampton**, VGN director of strategic growth and initiatives, seeking feedback on prospective VGN academic partnerships. Members were also asked about several current and important topics related to the convenience retailing industry.



VGN Academic Partnerships

Hampton presented a VGN academic partnership initiative on how universities can serve as engines of innovation and talent. “Academic institutions can be a great source of out-of-the-box thinking and short-term resources for projects and problem-solving opportunities,” he said. Drawing from personal experiences with Texas Tech University and Boise State University as CIO for Jacksons Food Stores, Hampton described how partnerships had delivered practical business outcomes while also strengthening recruitment pipelines.

Capstone Projects Create Mutual Successes

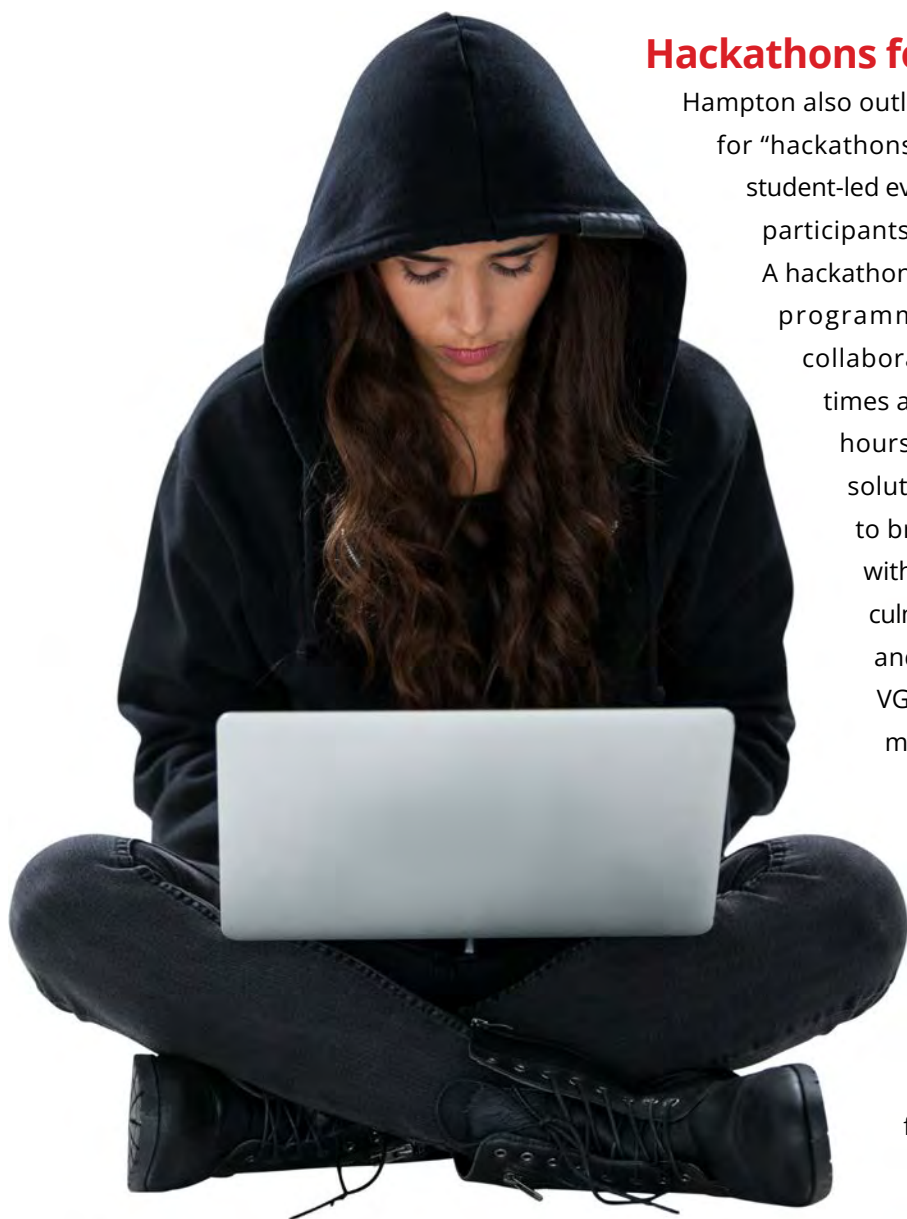
Hampton explained that semester-long capstone projects create structured opportunities for collaboration for retail organizations, emphasizing the required formalities of such projects including having students sign NDAs (non-disclosure agreements), license agreements, and compensation for any IP (intellectual property) that was used. Weekly check-ins with students and faculty and clear requirements ensured alignment. And, final presentations exposed students to real business units and provided companies with new insights. “It was kind of a win-win all around,” Hampton noted, reflecting on multiple successful projects at Jacksons. He noted that his alma mater Texas Tech University is already interested in collaborating with VGN.



“One thing that was a great benefit that came out of the work I did with Jacksons and Boise State is we opened up a pipeline of great students and talented individuals to come into the department. In fact, I believe the number was four out of the five folks that I hired on the BI (Business Intelligence) team came through Boise State through their program.

So, it was a great way to introduce students to the industry and to help folks recognize that the convenience industry isn't just about selling beer and cigarettes at 2 A.M. We're doing a lot of really cool things.

Robert Hampton, *Director of Strategic Growth and Initiatives, Vision Group Network*



Hackathons for Innovation

Hampton also outlined potential collaborations for “hackathons,” citing Texas Tech’s recent student-led events that drew three hundred participants and valuable sponsorships. A hackathon is an event where computer programmers and other specialists collaborate in a short period, sometimes a weekend or just twenty-four hours, to create a new product or solution. Participants form teams to brainstorm and develop ideas, with mentors providing guidance, culminating in a final presentation, and judging to identify winners. VGN could supply problem statements, judges, and sponsorship while universities handle logistics. The goal, he explained, was less about complete solutions and more about sparking creativity: “We may not solve a specific issue, but we may gain a lot of learning from what the students come up with.”

Aligning Industry Needs With Strategic Perspectives

Throughout his presentation, Hampton emphasized the importance of defining industry challenges clearly. He pointed to outdated technologies as a pressing issue, referencing Connexus Executive Director Gray Taylor’s observation that “[the convenience] industry is lugging around Soviet-era ‘80s technology when it comes to interfacing with fuel dispensers and stuff like that. And that’s kind of holding us back from the little ice cream store down the street that can handle transactions on an iPad and check people out in two seconds.”

With potentially thousands of computer science and engineering students ready to challenge, Hampton appealed to the group to identify projects that could deliver the greatest value. He noted that while Texas Tech is ready to engage, he solicited the group for additional educational institution connections as well as project suggestions.

Strasburger followed by situating the initiative within the broader mission of VGN whose motto is, “Sharing Today to Shape Tomorrow.” He framed the proposal as an exploratory effort with other Vision Groups to test viability and if warranted, shape direction and identify projects that could bring tangible benefits across the industry. The goal was not only to innovate but also to strengthen collaboration, ensuring that academic partnerships advanced both individual companies and the sector.

Building on Past Experience

The discussion reflected widespread enthusiasm for academic collaboration, tempered by lessons learned. **Eva Strasburger**, president of StrasGlobal, CEO of Compliance Safe and VGN co-founder, recalled earlier conversations within CLVG, especially referencing **Greg Parker**, executive chairman of Parker's, on a past student project analyzing electric vehicle drivers. In this meeting, Parker made a compelling case for artificial intelligence, arguing that "the people that are going to be the most successful are the ones that are going to be in the forefront of using this." He suggested focusing capstone projects on AI applications and partnering with top-tier universities and stressing the importance of matching the right project with the appropriate university, not forcing the project topic because the institution is already chosen.

Joe Sheetz, executive vice chairman of Sheetz Inc., and **Darren Rebelez**, chairman, president, and CEO of Casey's General Stores, both reinforced the need for

specificity and oversight. Both rejected the idea of university-led hackathons with Sheetz cautioning they yield "half-baked ideas." **James Hervey**, head of petro at Verifone, described how capstone projects they initiated with the University of Florida succeeded only when sponsors were engaged and guidance was consistent.

Workforce Development and Talent Pipelines

Several participants also stressed the opportunities with academic partnerships in building future talent. **Mark Samuels**, EVP of convenience retailing at Dash In/The Wills Group, highlighted his company's internship program with the University of Maryland, which both seeded recruitment and gave students exposure to the business. **Keith Slater**, chief financial officer at Family Express Corp., shared similar experiences, noting that projects allowed companies to identify student leaders and even hire directly from the programs, like they have done with Valparaiso University. Both emphasized that strong pipelines could reshape perceptions of convenience retail as a technologically advanced industry.

“ [With capstone projects] you have to be very, very specific about what you are trying to solve. You can't make it so open-ended. So if we're going to do something with AI, I think it has to be very specific. We're after these things, these efficiencies, these particular labor savings, these particular ways to track and talk to customers or whatever, because otherwise they just kind of go.

The check-ins are very important, too, to make sure they're not going somewhere that just frankly doesn't make sense, because you're sort of renting very large brains that know a lot about technologies that most of us, at least at my age, don't know about, but they really don't understand the business at all. And you need both.

Joe Sheetz, Executive Vice Chairman, Sheetz Inc.

Innovation and Practical Challenges

The conversation also underscored the importance of balancing innovation with practicality. Parker described the value of multidisciplinary approaches, using fields from industrial design to business intelligence. Wallis Companies CEO **Tracey Hughes** observed that professors with a commercial mindset were often more successful in guiding students toward usable outcomes than tech professors. **Laura Aufleger**, president of OnCue, added that even when student recommendations were imperfect to their needs, their fresh perspectives challenged assumptions and opened new avenues for exploration, citing previous work with Oklahoma State University students.

In terms of topics, **Annie Gauthier**, CFO/Co-CEO of Y-Not Stop – St. Romain Oil, proposed AI-driven scheduling tools to rethink the traditional eight-hour shift, an idea that connected with earlier conversations about work-force flexibility. **Joe Hamza**, chief operating officer at Nouria Energy, reflected on past student partnerships in marketing while working at a previous company and expressed enthusiasm for projects centered on data management and analytics.

Others, like **Jonathan Polonsky**, CEO of Plaid Pantry, and **Aditya Soman**, VP Fuels for OXXO USA, and guest of CLVG member **Hal Adams**, OXXO USA's managing director, shared examples of how academic projects could deliver community insights or be leveraged as learning opportunities for both students and companies. Polonsky reflected on a partnership with Portland State University where customer traffic studies yielded new insight on modes of transportation and alignment with QSRs, leading to reassessing their delivery and presentation. Soman recalls his time in graduate school doing similar real-world collaborative projects.

While reiterating the proposal is still in its preliminary stage with thoughts being captured from other VGN groups, Roy Strasburger summarized that meaningful research should be a long-term, tightly focused effort ideally spanning multiple semesters or years. Additionally, VGN is considering collaboration with NACS or Conexus to encourage well-rounded solutions that can benefit the industry as a whole.

CLVG members proposed several possible topics for capstone projects, including:

- Using AI to boost profits and cut costs
- Building AI tools for marketing, fuel pricing, and labor planning
- Measuring marketing effectiveness with business intelligence
- Analyzing turnover rates and transactions per labor hour
- Detecting fraud patterns using AI
- Creating a single platform to manage and analyze company data
- Exploring new media channels (YouTube, digital marketing)
- Using AI to combine sales forecasting with employee scheduling
- Developing an app for flexible shift scheduling (3–5-hour shifts)
- Building tools to clean and organize raw data
- Studying customer trip modes to differentiate from QSR traffic
- Running multi-year, industry-wide business intelligence projects

Taking Pulse of the Convenience Industry Leaders

A pulse-check on top industry topics rounded out the August CLVG meeting. Members were provided with six questions in advance on the following issues: 24-hour operations, EV charging, labor and workforce, tariffs, legislation, and AI.

The 24-Hour Store Format

The first topic posed by Roy Strasburger was whether the traditional 24-hour convenience store model is still viable given labor costs, safety, and shifting consumer patterns. The consensus was clear: while safety remains a factor, the 24-hour store continues to serve both operational needs and customer expectations.

Samuels strongly defended the model, noting that for Dash In, trust and consistency are critical. “If you’re not open 24 hours and you open late, even 10 minutes, and you’re not ready for the guests, you’re going to lose them because they’re not going to be able to count on you for being open,” he explained.

Others echoed the importance of late-night traffic. Hamza reported that third-shift sales at Nouria are “more vibrant, and strong as ever,” largely driven by online ordering, and noted that his company uses overnight hours for stocking and prep work. Sheetz described how his chain had leaned into 24-hour operations post-COVID, with only two stores reducing hours due to safety concerns. Gauthier added a rural perspective, saying St. Romain Oil has “increased staffing across our stores, so all or at least double staff nightly,” with the business case clearly supporting a 24/7 model.

“ We have a large number of guests that come to us around 5 AM and then that’s the start of the breakfast. And if you’re not open 24 hours and you open late, even 10 minutes, and you’re not ready for the guests, you’re going to lose them because they’re not going to be able to count on you for being open. So to me, having continuity builds trust and allows the guest to be able to count on us.

Mark Samuels, EVP of Convenience Retailing, Dash In/The Wills Group



EV Charging

Strasburger next turned to EV charging, asking whether adoption or forecasting had changed over the past 18 months. Parker, an early adopter of EV chargers, was blunt: “The EV charging customer does not spend what the internal combustion engine customer or the non-fuel buying customer spends.” While usage was steady at certain collector road sites, he noted adoption has slowed, despite his own long-time EV ownership.

Sheetz reported a mixed picture across his network, with some sites busy and others underused. He noted that government subsidies, particularly through NEVI grants, had driven earlier growth, but momentum has waned. Still, EV

drivers at Sheetz locations “come into the store more than the petroleum buying customer actually as a percentage,” even if their baskets are smaller.

Hamza described Nouria’s experience, with EV chargers at roughly 25% of sites but disappointing results: “We were very enthusiastic at the beginning. We made sure that every site we built accommodated or had the ability to accommodate EV charging. And we spent a lot of resources and money doing so, but we’re not getting the return right now.” He added that charger transactions have actually decreased in the past year, raising questions about whether convenience stores will ever be the primary EV charging destination.

“The charging technology is catching up, with new technology now that would have the battery charged in less than an hour and people will be charging more and more at home. They’re already doing that. It’s really evident in the fact that transactions for EV chargers are decreasing. So it’ll be interesting to see what happens. I think the trend is there. Obviously, there’ll be more adoption in time, but I’m not really sure that c-stores are going to be the destination for EV charging.

Joe Hamza, Chief Operating Officer, Nouria Energy





“ There’s a report that there’s been a drop of about 30% in entry level positions due to the implementation of AI. Are you still hiring at the store? How’s the labor market in the store for the folks coming into the store? And do you find that you can do more with less people from an administrative point of view at the office level?

***Roy Strasburger**, CEO of StrasGlobal, President of Compliance Safe, and Vision Group Network Co-Founder*

Labor and Workforce

On labor, Strasburger asked how companies were managing staffing both in-store and at the corporate level, especially as AI reshapes entry-level work. Polonsky reported marked improvement in Portland at Plaid Pantry, with turnover rates stabilizing and more experienced managers available longer. “Over the last six months, the quality of candidate is much improved, and the number of applicants has increased,” he said.

Gauthier noted better retention as well, though her company eliminated one administrative role by shifting duties to operations teams supported by AI. Samuels highlighted a different challenge at Dash In with the desire for fully remote work at the corporate level. Despite offering a hybrid Tuesday through Thursday schedule, he said, “more and more people want fully remote work... So we’re not hiring people fully-remote any longer because it kills collaboration and overall team building within the business.”

“ Weird things like pizza boxes have been such a challenge and such a problem. I don't know if it's necessarily tariff-related that's causing the supply issues, but it's just been kind of

a repeated problem that we've really been trying to overcome for a while now. And you're like, "How did they end up in Turkey?" I don't know. They need to be in Oklahoma.

Laura Aufleger, President, OnCue

Tariff Implications and Effects of the One Big Beautiful Bill

Tariffs, or potential tariffs, were the next theme. Many noted their greatest impact was felt on construction and equipment. Samuels pointed to higher costs for steel, millwork, gondolas, and car wash systems. Slater confirmed similar cost pressures at Family Express, particularly in construction and packaging. Aufleger described anxiety when awaiting imported private-label wine at OnCue, and ongoing headaches with supply issues such as pizza boxes. Hughes said Wallis Companies queried suppliers for clear justification to gauge if they were trying to pass through potential tariff-related increases or simply “to get in under the window to maximize their margins at the expense of ours.”

Strasburger asked if President Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill will have any impact on member's businesses. Hamza welcomed accelerated depreciation, citing positive financial impacts for Nouria given their recent acquisition. Samuels flagged the reduction of SNAP benefits as a small but negative sales impact. Polonsky observed that while SNAP cuts may reduce sales, they could improve labor availability, since “people actually need a job,” which he argued was a net benefit for his business.



AI Implementation in the Past Twelve Months

Finally, Strasburger asked how companies were incorporating AI into operations within the last year since the group last discussed it in detail. Slater explained that AI is being introduced gradually at Family Express: “Every solution we go out and buy is bringing in an AI component,” and staff are encouraged to use tools like ChatGPT to improve efficiency.

Hughes described a decentralized AI council at Wallis Companies that developed creative solutions, including a multilingual customer-support bot for wholesale fuel customers: “They loaded all of the manuals in that we had so that the customer can type in a question, ‘My tank monitor is doing this,’ and the bot gives back the answer.”

Aufleger noted predictive ordering tools emerging in foodservice operations at OnCue, while Gauthier reported deploying AI to analyze and trend

conversations at the Y-Not Stop registers, with applications for upselling, loyalty, and customer experience.

Both Strasburgers observed the growing importance of AI prompt engineering. Roy noted that “prompt writing is the new petroleum engineer, code writer of the future.” Gauthier concluded, “the ability to ask good questions has never been more important than it is now.” Kressner noted that a COO in the Convenience Foodservice Vision Group (CFVG) had recently invested in training people to write prompts to assist their first foray into AI.

“ I think the ability to ask good questions has never been more important than it is now.

Annie Gauthier, CFO/Co-CEO, Y-Not Stop – St. Romain Oil

Final Reflection

The convenience industry is challenged to balance operational consistency with the need to innovate. Key issues like evolving technology, workforce dynamics, changing customer behaviors, and shifting policies are driving both challenges and opportunities. The focus ahead will be on finding practical solutions, perhaps through collaborations with higher education institutions, which protect profitability while positioning the industry for long-term growth.



NOTABLE AND QUOTABLE

“ One thing that was a great benefit that came out of the work I did with Jacksons and Boise State is we opened up a pipeline of great students and talented individuals to come into the department.

Robert Hampton, *Director of Strategic Growth and Initiatives, Vision Group Network*

“ The third shift business is more vibrant now than ever, quite honestly. And primarily that's really driven by online ordering. So our business really has picked up at a really great degree, especially after midnight.

Joe Hamza, *Chief Operating Officer, Nouria Energy*

“ Everyone wants to run and say, “AI's going to solve the world.” Well, it's not unless you can figure out how to tie it into the actual business problems. So, I think this could be well done.

Joe Sheetz, *Executive Vice Chairman, Sheetz Inc.*

“ It seems to me that the people that are going to win the race of being the most successful business owners in the convenience store space and many other spaces are going to be the people that are most effectively using artificial intelligence.

Greg Parker, *Executive Chairman, Parker's*

“ I really echo what Greg [Parker] said. I think AI is a great place because you can just provide data and a training set and say, “Go see what you can find out.” I think Joe [Sheetz] made a great point about the fact that there's a multiplicity of technology systems, and students get very confused very quickly with the technology in our business because it's not common.

James Hervey, *Head of Petro, Verifone*

“ I know that when we were running our stores, it goes to the consistency issues. We did not want our customers to have to guess as to whether we were open or not. If they were going to go out in the evening, we would be available if they needed us.

Roy Strasburger, *CEO of StrasGlobal, President of Compliance Safe, and Vision Group Network Co-Founder*

“ So I think for us decentralizing and giving people the autonomy to play and use [AI] but also giving them a structure where they report back has been really helpful.

Tracey Hughes, *CEO, Wallis Companies*

TRANSCRIPT AND PRESENTATIONS



In The Room Transcript

The full meeting transcript is online and can be searched by keyword so that you can be “in the room” with us, rather than only having access to selected quotes and paraphrasing



Meeting Presentations and Demonstration Videos

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Keith Slater
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Family Express Corp



Kevin Smartt
CEO,
TXB Stores



Barbara Stoyko
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The Convenience Leaders Vision Group (CLVG) brings together convenience retail icons and trailblazers for quarterly virtual meetings. During these sessions, members identify trends, challenges and disruptions in retail as well as present possible solutions and opportunities. The group is committed to sharing its views and perspectives in order to advance the convenience retailing and mobility industry. CLVG operates under and is part of the Vision Group Network, which gathers the collective knowledge and ideas of its members to create a legacy of sharing within the retail community. For more information and to sign up for future Vision Reports, visit our website: vgnsharing.com/vision-report-library



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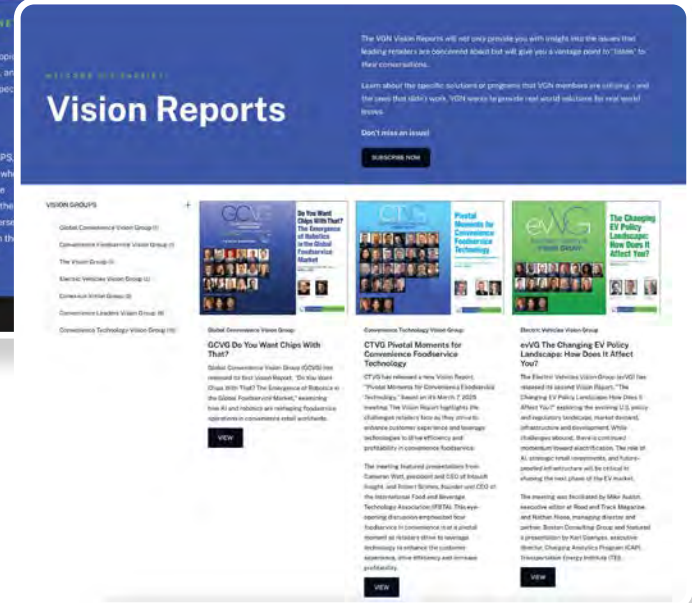


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