

pepperjam

YOUR COMPLETE BACK-TO-SCHOOL AFFILIATE PLANNING STRATEGY

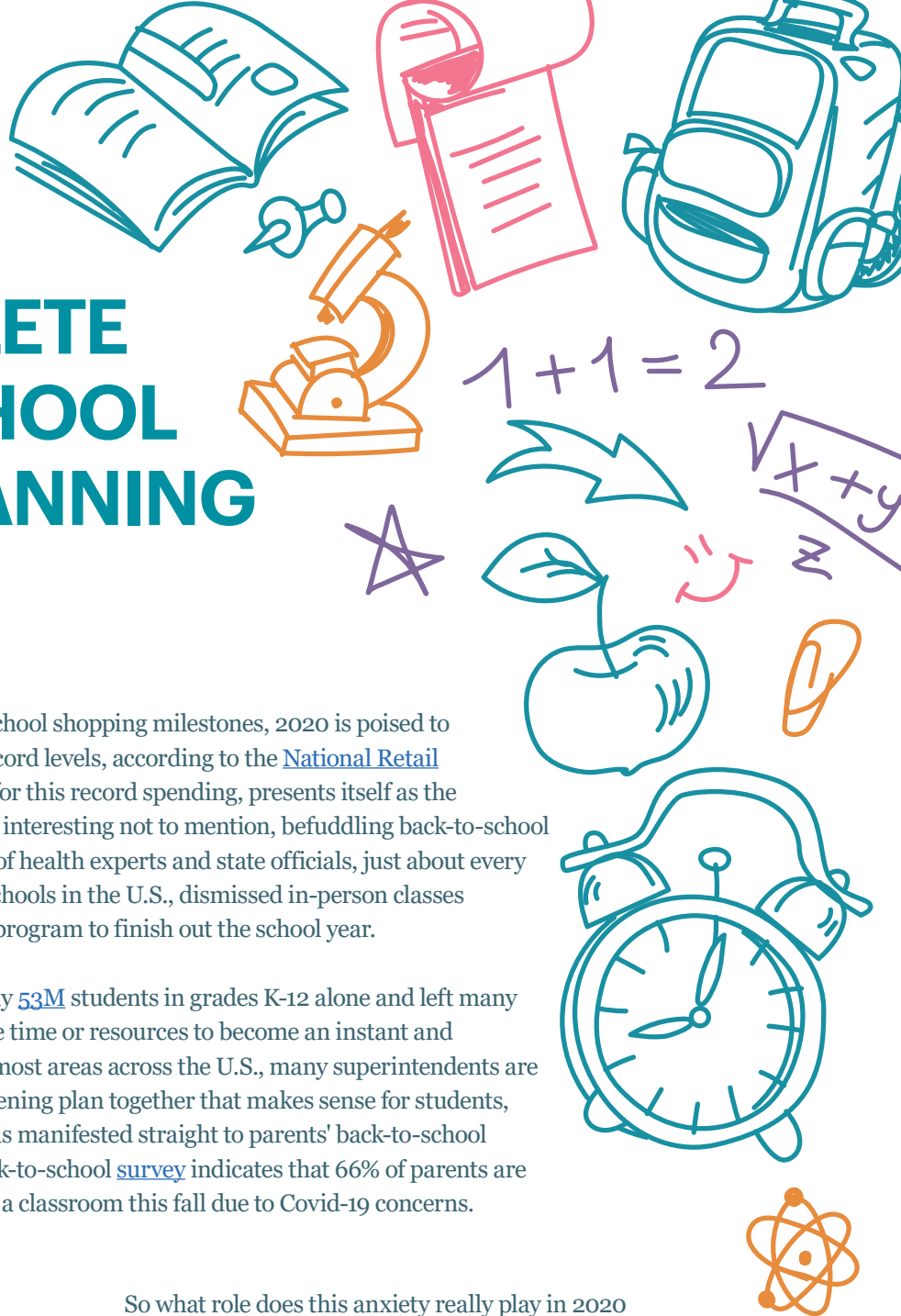
While 2019 no doubt reached record back-to-school shopping milestones, 2020 is poised to push back-to-school spending once again to record levels, according to the [National Retail Federation](#) (NRF). Only this year, the catalyst for this record spending, presents itself as the Covid-19 pandemic, which may make the most interesting not to mention, befuddling back-to-school shopping season yet. On the recommendation of health experts and state officials, just about every public school district, as well as most private schools in the U.S., dismissed in-person classes mid-March and parlayed into a remote school program to finish out the school year.

This switch to online education affected roughly [53M](#) students in grades K-12 alone and left many parents reeling, finding themselves without the time or resources to become an instant and effective teacher. The current reality is that in most areas across the U.S., many superintendents are still struggling to get a safe and practical re-opening plan together that makes sense for students, teachers and parents alike. This uncertainty has manifested straight to parents' back-to-school buying strategies. In fact, Deloitte's annual back-to-school [survey](#) indicates that 66% of parents are anxious about sending their children back into a classroom this fall due to Covid-19 concerns.



So what role does this anxiety really play in 2020 back-to-school shopping and if there are records being broken, what is all this money being spent on?

According to the [NRF](#), parents whose children ranged in age from Kindergarten through 12th grade in 2019 indicated they spend an average of \$696.70. That same segment of parents cite an increase this year with spend coming in at an average of \$789.49. Total back-to-school spend (K-12), overall, is expected to be up by a whopping \$7.7B—from \$26.2B in 2019 to \$33.9B in 2020. Worth noting that this \$33.9B shatters the previous back-to-school spend record of \$30.3B set back in 2012. Why the surge in spend? The NRF attributes the surge to a record number of parents bracing for months of at-home learning.





By any measure, this is an unprecedented year with great uncertainty, including how students will get their education this fall whether they are in kindergarten or college. Most parents don't know whether their children will be sitting in a classroom or in front of a computer in the dining room, or a combination of the two. But they do know the value of an education and are navigating uncertainty and unknowns so that students are prepared.

—Matthew Shay, NRF President & CEO



According to the NRF, combined total back-to-school spending (Kindergarten through college) is forecasted to hit the \$101.6B mark—surpassing last year's \$80.7B and also cresting the \$100B mark for the first time ever.

Back-to-Class Shopping 2020

\$789.49

Average planned spending per household for back-to-school shoppers - highest ever recorded by NRF



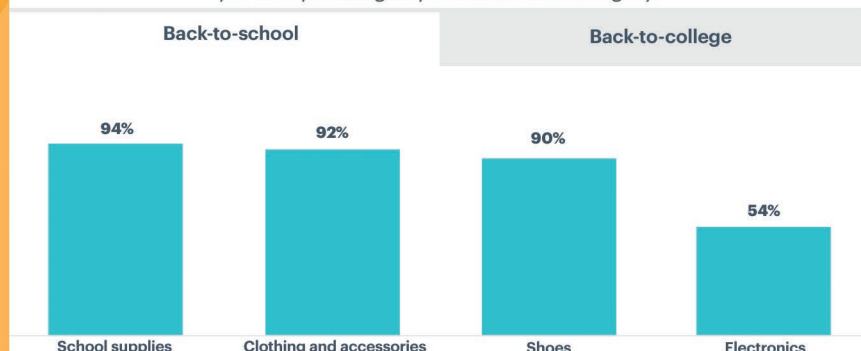
\$101.6B

Total combined planned spending for back-to-school and back-to-college shoppers

\$1,059.20

Average planned spending per household for back-to-college shoppers - highest ever recorded by NRF

Planned purchases by category
percent planning to purchase each category

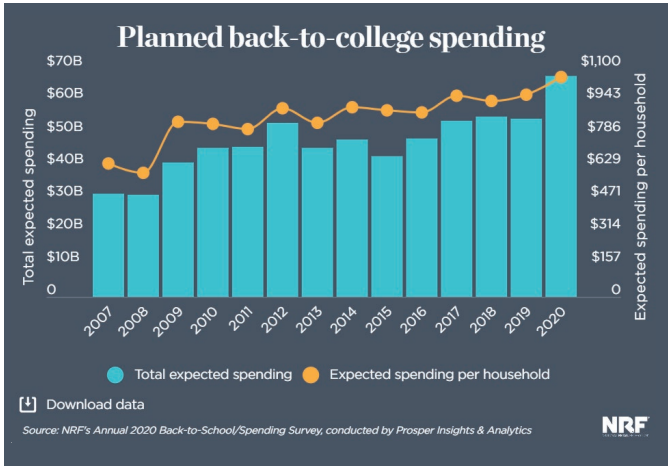


Source: NRF Annual 2020 Back-to-School/College Spending Survey, conducted by Prosper Insights & Analytics





For college-aged shoppers and their parents, a similar pattern emerges with the average spend expected to reach \$1059.20—up from last year's record of \$976.78 per family. Total back-to-school college spending is forecasted to be a whopping \$13.2B higher than last year or \$67.7B from \$54.5B and breaking the previous record of \$55.3B set back in 2018.



But despite all these record-breaking predictions, the reality is parents still aren't clear on the go-forward plan is and this uncertainty translates into anxiety over where, when or even if to spend more in any given category over another right now.

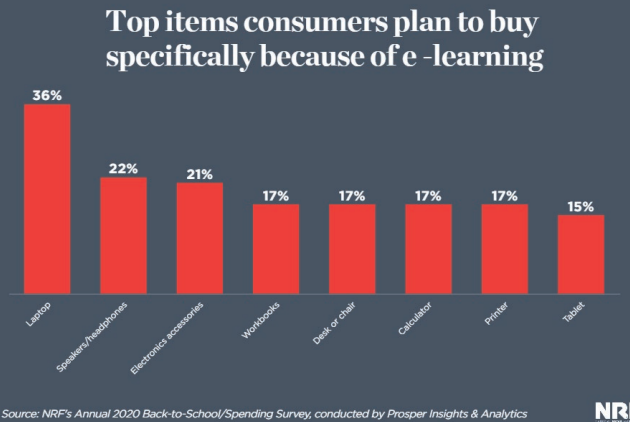
When it comes to affiliate marketing, the back-to-school planning show must go on, so regardless of what the re-opening plan looks like, let's get prepared by exploring some trends and optimization tactics.

The shift to online learning

According to the NRF, 54% of shoppers indicated that they have not started their shopping at all as of mid-July simply because of all the uncertainty of what they will actually need to buy. In fact, just 10% cited that they were given an official list from officials on what to buy with 40% expecting that list by the end of July and 30% by the end of August.

What's the takeaway?

The idea of e-learning looming over the school year has accelerated the interest in spending on tech products over the traditional clothing and school supply categories. This is an opportunity for brands who may not typically partake in the traditional "back-to-school" sense to push their products and services on publishers and garner premium placement as a result of Covid. The anticipation of e-learning has also prompted a spike in digital subscriptions to e-learning platforms, online courses, online tutors as well as licenses for educational tools. Be mindful of the situation shoppers are in and cater your messaging to them. While your products may not resonate at this exact time, you still can and should engage with your publisher partners to gain insight into other upcoming opportunities and keep your brand relatively top of mind. Send newsletters, but be cognizant of the content that is being used and still include offers or evergreen messaging.





Back-to-School shopping season is delayed due to uncertainty

Back-to-school shopping season has long been considered the warmup for the impending peak holiday shopping season, also serving as the perfect time to kick-off your ad strategy optimizations ahead of the predictable chaos. The 2020-2021 school year is certainly unique, but that doesn't stop promotions from maintaining their course. Many brands have been promoting deals since the beginning of June and many will continue to offer deals well into the fall as parents adjust to the new normal whether that presents itself as in-person, at-home or a hybrid attendance model.

What's the takeaway?

While the consumer is still in control and will call the shots in their back-to-school shopping, the timing may be largely dictated on decisions coming down from school officials across the nation.

Should retailers and brands feel the need for additional consumer incentive to buy, the deals will come whether it's in June, July, August, September — or beyond. This waiting game will only further fuels shoppers' ability to hold out and wait for the best prices. This should come as good news for local shops as according to Deloitte, Covid-19 has prompted many parents to shop closer to home. Additionally, if consumers feel a product's price still has room to wiggle down, they're here for it and they'll wait it out. Now is a good time for brick-and-mortar stores to leverage digital in-store coupons and in-store-only deals to increase order pick-up and curb-side delivery traffic. Online cash-back offers also perform well now to encourage more timely purchases.



Shifts in category spend

Uncertainty still swirls around what classrooms will actually look like this fall. Will they be filled? Filled half of the time? Filled all the time with half of the students? Or will our kitchens, living rooms and dining rooms maintain their status as schoolhouse? In more cases than not, that has yet to be determined. But when it comes to where shoppers will be spending this year, it makes sense that clothing and accessories would take a back-seat position to technology products. In fact, according to the NRF, technology products are expected to experience a 28% YoY growth in 2020.

What's the takeaway?

This doesn't mean that clothing and apparel will go ignored during back-to-school shopping amid Covid, it just means that 63% of parents and shoppers said they are more focused on what their in-home classrooms should look like, in the event online schooling becomes a reality. This means a greater investment in computers, laptops, tablets, PCs, new phones and even e-learning subscriptions. Now is a good time to revisit the partners you work with and consider diversifying your reach to work with tech-oriented publisher partners who cater more to tech savvy audiences where your products may be best showcased to the most relevant audiences. Think out-of-the box to online tutorials and online product reviews with influencers.



From mobile to desktop

This may come as a surprise, but as more parents and shoppers continue to work remotely in efforts to keep the spread of Covid-19 at bay, it seems they are also shifting their shopping habits from mobile phones (46%) to desktop computers (64%).

What's the takeaway?

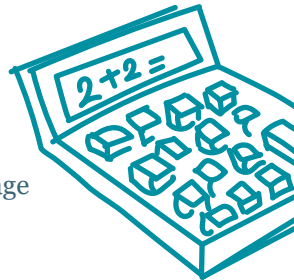
While many shoppers will be buying from home and in many cases, as indicated, from their desktops, there will still be considerable shopping happening from mobile. This means you still want to work with those partners who are mobile adept and have the best odds of reaching your target consumers not only earlier in their purchase path, but at every point. You will also need to provide these publishers with the right content needed to make your product stand out from the other "not-you" products. Also, don't forget to ensure that all your content renders properly on mobile or all your effort will be for naught. Finally, consider participating in push notifications to get your brand out there and target a specific audience (also geotarget to specific stores) and commission more aggressively on mobile purchases.





By online, pick-up in store (BOPIS) is on the rise

If there is one thing Covid taught brick-and-mortar marketers it's that just as with the digital shopping experience, it's imperative that they be available when and where their shoppers need them. With shoppers eager to have contactless formats and buying experiences, they are really taking advantage of buy online, pick up in-store offers.



What's the takeaway?

For now, it appears as though parents and shoppers are adjusting to this norm and that extends to the need for contactless, in-store pick up on back-to-school items, big and small.

Take advantage by BOPIS by extending in-store incentives to this format, digitally. Work with your publishing partners who have the most success driving in-store purchases and use data and tools to support the optimization of this tactic, extended to pick-ups. If possible, commission on in-store purchases.

Since you are going through all this effort, you better make certain that your offers appear visually attractive! Contemporary social media platforms like Pinterest and Instagram, really hit home with Gen Z (remember, despite Covid, consumers are still spending more this year, so make every visual used count).



Consider content partners

Covid-19 has its grips on consumers and their back-to-school shopping strategies and decisioning. Yet no matter what the current climate looks like or what category your brand is in, keep in mind the critical value content partners can bring you.



What's the takeaway?

People value and tend to take the word of those they trust. Content partners take this trust very seriously by delivering top-notch content to their audiences that could be featuring your brand and products. Leverage content partners to help push full-priced product and don't neglect testing new opportunities and strategies to maximize reach and revenue throughout the entire season. Also, consider gifting these partners to get more engagement from their editors. This will help with getting more organic exposure during the back-to-school shopping season.



Tips, Tactics & Takeaways

Establish KPIs now!

If you haven't already, establish your KPI goals now as we move quickly toward Q4. Back-to-school is one of the last—and most important—pushes you'll have before holiday peak season takes hold (and this peak shopping season is sure to be notable!). Setting tangible goals around revenue, traffic and other relevant metrics helps you figure out what to focus on.



Over-communicate with publisher partners

Publisher partners are your virtual sales force and they need to be armed with the right information, so strive to over-communicate here. Also, keep in mind that some brands aren't necessarily regarded as traditional "back-to-school" brands (think: hand sanitizers, face masks, personal protective gear, etc.) yet are completely relevant to the times therefore making now the perfect opportunity to convey this message of relevancy to partners.



Offers

Always start with the consumer offer and message. The Pepperjam teams that fully manage clients always make it a best practice to ask for these as far out as possible because publishers fill back-to-school placements considerably quick—and early—many by the beginning of the summer. However, bear in mind that the current climate extends, even pushes back traditional back-to-school shopping season. Also valuable are offers that can push just past back-to-school season to capture any additional placements for the beginning of peak season. Some tried and true offers include BOGO, \$ OFF, % OFF, etc.

Understanding that offers can change last minute, be sure there's enough time to coordinate change with publishers. Additionally, try to match offers to other on-site promotions and other marketing promotions as this really helps with the consumer experience. Create a sense of urgency and excitement with limited time offers: think 'One Day Only!', 'This week only!', 'Save 15% Site wide + Free Shipping at X'. Finally, don't forget to play up your buy online, pick up in store offers. BOPIs offers/messaging might take a bit more care and detail. This is new for everyone so you want to ensure all of the details on 'in-store pick up' or curbside pickup are made available to publishers to in turn send the right message to consumers.

Category/Product promotions:

Take a category-and-product focus when promoting sales. For example, if a sale is 15% off site wide, also market it as a 15% off all school supplies or backpacks or emphasize rewards for buying online and picking up in store. Additionally, brands can also push specific product by increasing SKUs for specific product categories. This is great strategy for targeting niche publishers!



Summary

Uncertainty over a back-to-school plan naturally creates anxiety in parents and students of all ages. For marketers, being prepared or having a plan amid the uncertainty can propel your 2020 back-to-school strategy from average to the head of the class.





Back To School



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Want to learn more? [Contact us today.](#)

