

pepperjam®

YOUR COMPLETE BACK-TO-SCHOOL AFFILIATE PLANNING STRATEGY

While it may seem crazy to think our little ones will once again be strapping on backpacks and boarding school buses (didn't summer just start?), the reality is, across the country, August is the new September, so it's best to just accept this truth and get prepared.

And 2019 is set to hold some record-breaking spending this year with families of elementary-age children planning to spend an average of \$696.70—up nearly \$12 from last year's number. In fact, this tops the previous record of \$688.62 set way back in 2012. The [National Retail Federation](#) predicts that combined spending for back-to-school and college spending will hit a staggering \$80.7B. This down from last year's spend of \$82.8B but can be partly attributed to a decrease in households that have children in classes ranging from Kindergarten through twelfth grade. The average spend per-household for college students was a whopping \$976.78—again, the highest number ever recorded by the NRF.



So, what is all this money being spent on and who plans to buy what this year?

Just about everything from pencils and paper to college-branded sweatshirts and mini fridges.

Specifically, for school-aged children, the vast majority of respondents (94%) said they will be purchasing school supplies followed closely by clothing/accessories (92% with an average spend of \$239.82) and shoes (90%).

Electronics (think: calculators, tablets and phones) trailed for the school-aged with 54% of respondents shopping here but totaling \$203.44 of spend.

Back-to-college shoppers start off with similar numbers: 87% said they plan to allocate spend to school supplies, 78% to clothing/accessories (or a spend of \$148.54) and 73% plan to spend on shoes. However, older students have different, perhaps more evolved needs and 78% said spend will also go toward personal care, 72% said food items, 57% said college-branded gear and clothing (up 17% since last year!) 53% said electronics, 51% said furnishings and 37% said gift cards.

It would also appear as though Gen Z is taking a more active approach in making sure they do their part. Teens will be spending an average of \$36.71 of their hard-earned cash contributing to the cause—up nearly \$6 from a decade ago.

Back-to-Class Shopping 2019

\$696.70

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



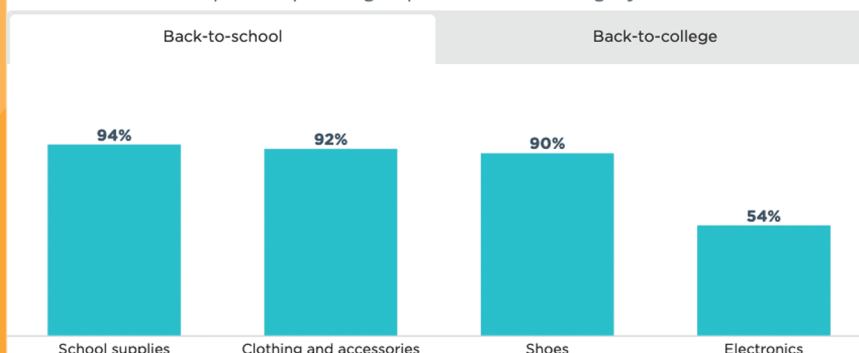
\$80.7B

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

\$976.78

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



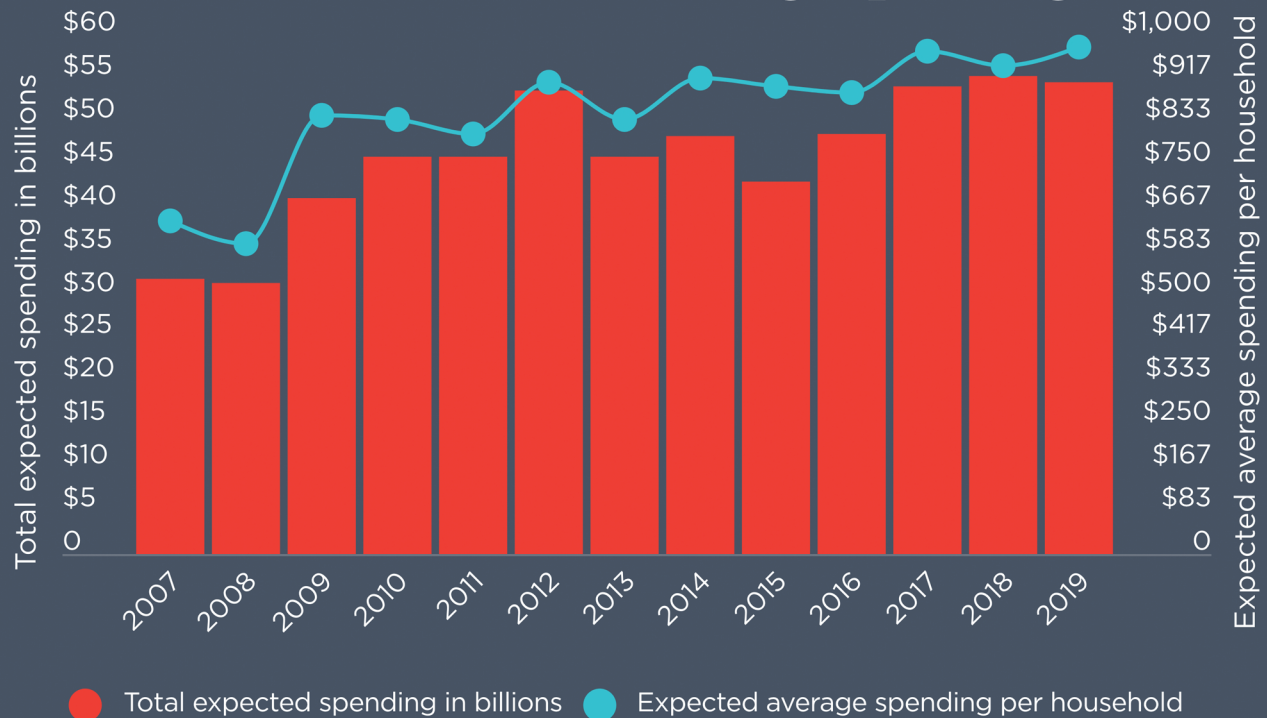
Source: NRF's Annual 2019 Back-to-School/College Spending Survey, conducted by Prosper Insights & Analytics

NRF
THE VOICE OF RETAIL



Their older college-bound counterparts will satisfy 45% of their needs online—down 4% from last year, 39% in departments store, 36% at discount stores, 32% at college bookstores and 29% at office supply stores.

Planned back-to-college spending

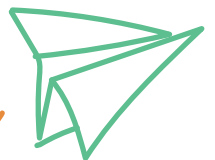


Source: NRF's Annual 2019 Back-to-School/Spending Survey, conducted by Prosper Insights & Analytics

NRF
NATIONAL RETAIL FEDERATION

But despite all these record-breaking predictions, the reality is that it's still somewhat early in the back-to-school game and more than half of back-to-school shopping still needs to be tackled in August and even September. This will really be evident over the next two weeks, as parents are biding their time now, waiting patiently for the best deals they know will inevitably arrive in their inboxes and mailboxes.

In affiliate marketing, back-to-school planning is big business and the name of the game is optimization. So, without any further ado, let's take a look at the unofficial syllabus on back-to-school affiliate optimization tactics!



Back-to-School shopping season is getting longer

Back-to-school 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. Recent data from a [survey](#) conducted by RetailMeNot showed that a whopping 84% of retailers consider Amazon's Prime Day to mark the unofficial kick off to back-to-school shopping. True to the form of all special occasions, promotions start early! We've already seen deals upon deals dating back to June, which is right about the time back-to-school promotions begin running or as soon as the summer bells ring.

What's the takeaway?

In short: the consumer is in control and continues to call the shots surrounding how and when back-to-school shopping season unfolds. And while Prime Day (also consumer driven), occurs in July, consumers are savvy—strategic in their spending—they know that they can take advantage of deals there and then or they can patiently wait it out until the very best of the best deals are released. Remember: they're in control.



If retailers and brands feel the need for additional consumer incentive to buy, the deals will come whether it's in June, July, August, or September. Consumers have been careful students to brands' retail patterns. They know when they're being responded to and they understand they hold the proverbial purse strings. This same RetailMeNot survey showed that shoppers will make—on average—16 trips to stores to stock up on back-to-school supplies between July and September. 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 foot traffic. Cash-back offers also perform well now to encourage more timely purchases.

Specific product categories perform better at different times. Now is the time to get familiar with what products your audience is in-market for—it's all about timing. For instance, device (phone, tablet, etc.) purchases peak between July to early August while clothing purchases tend to peak from Labor Day through late September. Knowing who is buying what and when enables you to better target and reach your consumers. College necessities (think: dorm-room staples) tend to be bought in August, just before classes begin. College students who board at the school and teachers stocking up on cleaning supplies also stock up just before Labor Day.



JULY → EARLY AUGUST



LABOR DAY → LATE SEPT.



AUGUST



JUST BEFORE LABOR DAY

Interestingly, the consumer really is in control—even when it comes to what we wear. We see non-essential items, including apparel and footwear sales, hitting later after students had ample time to see and make mental grades of the looks they want to replicate. Bottom line: communicate with your publishing partners on which products are selling and which are not so they can push that particular inventory to align with consumer purchase interest and intent.

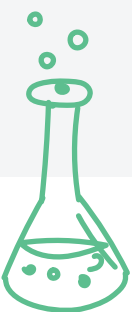


Mobile goes to the head of the class

Kids aren't the only ones with eyes locked on smartphones. Mobile shopping for back-to-school supplies will jump to 60%—rising as much as [7%](#) this year. Mobile scores points in the summer mainly for its accessibility and portability for families traveling to and from vacations, not to mention during their lazier downtime while on vacation. In addition to just comparison shopping on mobile, 49% of shoppers indicate that they will follow through and complete more purchases on mobile this year. Data also suggests desktop purchases will drop this year by 7% from 49% to 42%. Worth noting that the vast majority, 85%, of shopper said they will not be getting in on AI emerging and voice-assisted technologies to get any of their back-to-school shopping done.

What's the takeaway?

There are more eyes on mobile than ever before. Take the time to work more closely with your most mobile-adept publishers who 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.



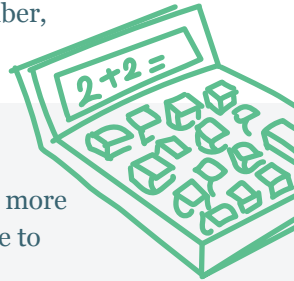


Seasonal shopping spikes are perfect for increasing foot traffic in-store

[Chain Store Age](#) just reported that an estimated 58% of back-to-school spend will happen in-store in 2019. As we well know, seasonal shopping cycles are key times to cash in on in-store sales. Be sure to leverage your digital campaigns to drive actual foot traffic to your locations. For example, engage publishers that can aid in driving in-store traffic with regional targeting on mobile devices thru push notifications or offer in-store incentives (read: cashback to lure more consumers in-store).

What's the takeaway?

While mobile purchases are certainly on the rise, it's clear brick-and-mortar patronage isn't going away any time soon so take advantage by extending in-store incentives, 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. 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, they're reportedly kicking in more than ever this year!), so make every visual used count.



Labor Day: The Cyber Monday of back-to-school season

[Labor Day weekend](#) is a critical back-to-school shopping time for two reasons: A 3-day weekend means more time to shop and across the country, many children have already returned to school and had ample time to check out the styles they want their parents to invest in.

What's the takeaway?

Marketers would be wise to get in on the 3-day weekend action by building up the anticipation of all the offers to come. Take advantage of the week leading up to really promote the big back-to-school deals. Again, shoppers know how to wait out a good deal, so be prepared to offer your best deals yet, or feeling deflated, they will surely shop at the dreaded competition.



They'll pay the price to look good

There is consistency here every year—consumers will pay for the looks they—or perhaps, their children—really want. The [NRF](#) reports that money spent on apparel will average just about \$239.82 per shopper. This tells us two things: When it comes to image and keeping up appearance, children and their parents agree that it's worth the price—full or otherwise. It also means that shopping isn't solely motivated by discounts.

What's the takeaway?

Basic school supplies will always be in demand. In contrast, the fashion trends that are in high-demand this year, could be next year's impossible-to-move inventory. The short: Tastes in fashion change yet shoppers are still willing to pay for the looks they want—even if just for that year. At an average of over \$239 per shopper going to apparel, this is a perfect opportunity to tap your influencers and social media campaigns to introduce your brand to a fresh new customer base. Leverage content publishers to push full-priced products and hot styles. This diversification in publisher-type lessens your dependability on coupon and loyalty publishers. Good examples of these editorial or content publishers include BuzzFeed, Business Insider, Conde Nast, PC Mag (think: product reviews).

However, keep in mind that shoppers have patience and willpower and will wait deals out until they make the most sense to them. You can try to out-wait them, but it's a risky move, so offer compelling deals and lure them in! Don't get caught trying to wait out back to school shoppers. Give them a reason to shop with you through a compelling offer that stands out.

What's the takeaway for marketers?

Leverage content publishers to help push full-priced product and don't neglect testing new opportunities and strategies to maximize reach and revenue throughout the entire 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. Setting tangible goals around revenue, traffic and other relevant metrics helps you figure out what to focus on.

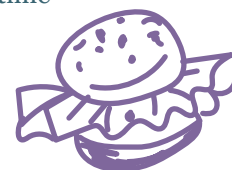


Offers

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. 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'.



Negotiations

Target the right publishers for that brand—all within their KPIs and budget. Try to get these secured in or around July, knowing that there will be left over last-minute inventory closer to prime-time, back-to-school season. So, the idea is full coverage going into the holiday and then picking up additional weekly placements as they arise.

Many publishers carve out back-to-school category pages that link from the home page. They may also offer newsletters to opt into.

Category/Product Sales:

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. This is great strategy for targeting niche publishers!



Back To School



Sources

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

