

# Gearing Up for Back-to-School

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A back-to-school look from Decree at J.C. Penney. Photo By Courtesy Photo

With merchandise ready to hit the floors and marketing campaigns in place, retailers are hoping back-to-school can lift them out of the doldrums.

After a disappointing b-t-s season last year and arguably the most difficult 12 months they've ever experienced, retailers are eager to reel teens into their stores and entice them with fresh trends, cutting-edge marketing strategies and in-store events.

However, observers say many retailers are choosing to play it too safe this season by offering too many basics. This is a concern for many b-t-s shoppers — 27 percent of the 1,500 teens and parents surveyed in WSL Strategic Retail's "How America Shops" study said they are ready to splurge. And of the items they want to splurge on, clothing came in first on the list, followed by a vacation, a night out and decorating the home. And, 48 percent of shoppers interviewed for the survey said they could afford to splurge on something. However, if they were to spend, they want it to be something "different and special." Furthermore, 50 percent of the teens surveyed said they would rather save their money for that one special item, rather than spend it on many less expensive ones.

Candace Corlett, president of WSL Strategic Retail, thinks smart retailers are closely watching teen and parent shopping patterns and applying it to their b-t-s expectations.

“We are seeing that some are buying a little each week and spreading it out over several paychecks,” she said of shoppers. “But there’s also an equal percentage of people who don’t do their back-to-school shopping until right before school starts.”

Based on results from the “How America Shops” survey, Corlett said shoppers’ mind-sets have certainly changed this year — likely due to the financial stresses many people are feeling from the recession. Corlett said she found it surprising that only about 12 percent of the adults surveyed said they actually enjoy shopping for their kids for b-t-s.

“For some families, shopping has just become aggravating,” she said. “The recession has really put a damper on the idea of shopping.”

As a result, the survey found 40 percent of shoppers said they will seek out less expensive stores for b-t-s shopping this year. A few of the favorites mentioned include Wal-Mart, Dollar General and Family Dollar.

Sapna Shah and Lisa Walters, founders and principals of Retail Eye Partners, an independent equity research and consulting firm, said they are hearing many people will shop much closer to the time that school begins. And, in some states, like California, a number of schools do not start until as late as Sept. 10.

“With the state of this economy, fewer people are buying well in advance,” Shah said. “Things are slower at the malls and there are fewer teens there to buy things.”

However, on a positive note, Walters said teens do still see shopping as a major form of entertainment, even though they may spend less overall and are looking for a great deal.

“Back-to-school is much more fashion focused now than it was,” Walters said. “We will see a less preppy look, less Americana and more plaid, neon, rebel, rocker looks.”

Walters said overall, she believes retailers have become much more focused on the fashions teens want to wear now, and shopping for b-t-s will be less about brand and more about price. She said while she sees stores such as Pacific

Sunwear of California Inc. and Hot Topic Inc. heading in the right directions trendwise, stores such as American Eagle Outfitters Inc. may have a harder time since the chain is so well-known for its preppy look. That said, since price is such a driving factor, teens may be driven into American Eagle to buy jeans if there's a great deal to be had. American Eagle reported an 11 percent decline in comparable-store sales results in June after struggling with merchandising and pricing.



Looks from Macy's for back-to-school. Photo By: Courtesy Photo

Walters also said that since so many shoppers are planning to do their b-t-s shopping just before school begins, retailers are holding off on their in-store promotions until later in August.

At J.C. Penney Co. Inc., a spokesman said the department store is prepared for the b-t-s season with an intense marketing campaign titled "Schooled In Style" that reaches teens where they are — from social networking sites like Facebook to mobile phones, TV and cinemas.

"This is the first time we've integrated social media into our b-t-s campaign," he said. "The JCP Teen Facebook page as well as [jcp.com/teen](http://jcp.com/teen), featuring a digital runway show, are new components of our b-t-s campaign. Also, this year's campaign showcases J.C. Penney's recently launched, exclusive and private brands — RS By Sheckler, Rusty, Third Rail a Zoo York Production and Decree, along with J.C. Penney's other most desired teen brands."

The spokesman said while this will be a challenging season for all retailers, Penney's is ready to take on b-t-s.

“Our marketing campaign showcases the diverse and fashion-forward assortment of brands we offer and makes it clear to customers that even as we’ve stepped up our style, they can continue to rely on J.C.Penney for great quality and affordability,” he said. “While it’s still quite early in the season, we’re pleased with the initial customer reaction to some of the newness in our b-t-s assortment.”

Macy’s Inc. is also taking steps toward making the coming b-t-s season a good one. The retailer plans to team up with Teen Vogue to do a series of in-store styling events where a stylist from the magazine will work with shoppers to build the perfect b-t-s wardrobe. Following the styling sessions, the teens will be judged, and one winner at each store will receive a \$5,000 Macy’s shopping spree and a spot in a Teen Vogue fashion shoot. In addition, the retailer is working with Seventeen magazine to do a fashion show and mini-makeovers in the stores. These events will happen in late August and early September.

On the fashion end, Macy’s vice president and fashion director Nicole Fischelis has been working hard to bring in the best trends for b-t-s.

“We have a refreshed point of view for back-to-school,” she said. “We want to surprise them and create desire...an impulse buy. Our assortment for the season is fresh, fun and affordable.”

Fischelis said the Macy’s Denim Book, due out to customers later this month, is filled with clothes and accessories highlighting all of the trends for the b-t-s season. The book highlights options from all over the store — in denim, accessories, young contemporary, juniors and contemporary.

“Denim is a huge component for us for back-to-school, so the book highlights all kinds of things that go with denim — T-shirts, tunics, layering pieces, buffalo check tops, distressed leather jackets, great outerwear,” Fischelis said.