Back-to-School Shopping:
How Marketers Can Make the Grade

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Almost as soon as school is over, busy parents begin prepping to send their kids back. They rely on their mobile devices for back-to-school shopping and do their homework to get the best deals. Here are a few trends marketers should know about to take advantage of those many I-want-to-buy moments.

think with Google

Summer vacations are just now in full swing, and already the back-to-school season is upon us. With free time at a premium, some busy parents can barely find the time to [shuttle their kids](#) to camp, let alone shop around for the best products and deals. They're relying on mobile more than ever to help with their back-to-school shopping, ticking off their checklists in [I-want-to-buy moments](#) throughout the day. To better understand consumer behavior around back-to-school shopping—the second-largest shopping season of the year—we studied Google data and surveyed shoppers online. Here's your cheat sheet.

The back-to-school season starts earlier and buying is faster

Before they go shopping, consumers go searching. Search interest for "[back to school](#)" grew 48% last year,[1] and it's already up 12% this year.[2] And that research is starting earlier than ever before. This year, search interest started trending up a week earlier than last year and a whole three weeks earlier than 2013.[3]

At the same time, the actual purchasing process is happening relatively quickly. Eighty percent of back-to-school shoppers try to finish their shopping in two weeks or less.[4] Nearly the same number (70%) said they'd shop at three or fewer stores for their supplies.[5]

Compare that short span of shopping time with the growing period of upfront research, and you see a new consumer journey taking shape. In all likelihood, shoppers already have their minds made up when they set out to buy. The message for marketers is clear: To influence purchase decisions, be early and be online.

"Last summer, about 40% of back-to-school searches were done on mobile devices, and already this year, mobile share is topping 50%."

Parents are shopping in micro-moments throughout the day

When are busy parents doing all this research? In hundreds of [micro-moments](#) throughout the day on their smartphones—whether they're killing time until camp ends or multi-tasking in front of the TV at night. Last summer, about 40% of back-to-school searches were done on mobile devices,[6] and already this year, mobile share is topping 50%.[7]

When research is done and people are ready to buy, mobile bridges the gap. More than half of back-to-school apparel shoppers use a smartphone while shopping to get price comparisons, inventory availability, or directions.[8] We've also seen that [local searches are increasing exponentially](#) because people use mobile devices to find stores nearby.

Specifically during back-to-school season, search interest in "shoe stores near me" spiked in August for the last two years in a row, and it more than doubled year over year.[9] Compare that to "shoe store locations" searches, which are declining. This suggests that people aren't necessarily planning out shopping trips the way they used to. They're shopping in I-want-to-go moments and relying on mobile to tell them where to head.

Search Interest for "Shoe Store Locations" vs. "Shoe Stores Near Me"

- ● Shoe Store Locations
- ● Shoe Store Near Me

2011   2012   2013   2014   2015

Source: Google Trends, January 2011–June 2015, United States.

Brands that make mobile a central part of their digital marketing strategy are seeing results. Take Walmart's 2014 back-to-school campaign. Mobile accounted for 7% of the spend but drove 14% of the campaign's impact on overall shopping intent, according to a study from the Mobile Marketing Association. The campaign also drove foot traffic. The same study reported that Walmart's use of proximity targeting, which lets you deliver ads to consumers within a certain distance, was far more effective than when location targeting wasn't used.

Go-to items on back-to-school checklists

Some of the must-haves for back to school 2014 included emoji and Herschel backpacks as well as Birkenstock sandals.[10] And dorm dwellers zeroed in on washi tape as a way to improve their school surroundings. What will drive shoppers to stores this season? Based

on Google Shopping interest, there will likely be biker jeans (R.I.P. skinny jeans), culottes (thanks, Kendall), and Under Armour's Curry One kicks roaming the halls this fall. (Oh, and for better or worse, plaid is in.[10])

▲ What's In:
Top Rising Searches

disney vans	booties
curry one	biker jeans
quay sunglasses	silicone rings
culottes	black ripped jeans
dashiki	lace up flats

▼ What's Out:
Top Declining Searches

fringe shorts	wedge sneakers
tribal shorts	maxi dress
combat boots	high waisted shorts
wingtips	camo pants
cap toe shoes	bro tanks

▲ What's Still In:
Top Seasonal Searches

birkenstocks	kimonos
jelly shoes	plaid shirt
romper	

▼ What's On Its Way Out:
Top Declining Seasonal Searches

|	
cutout dress	paracord bracelets
wedge heels	seersucker
denim jackets	

## Back-to-school campaigns shouldn't be one-size-fits-all

Searches for back-to-school supplies and apparel are consistent across the country. It's *when* they search that varies a lot, especially by region. For example, searches for "bags and packs" tend to start in late June in the Deep South, expand westward, and then head to the Midwest and the Northeast. By mid-July, the whole country is in the market.[11] When it comes to footwear, searches don't really heat up until August, when interest spreads south to north.[11]
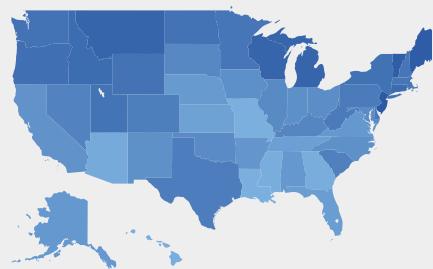
When Backpack Searches Peak by State

June 15
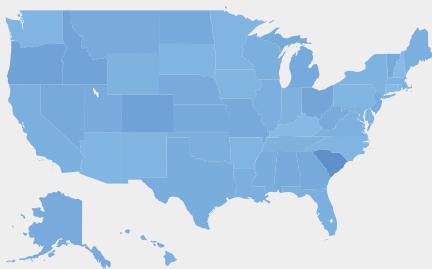
July 13

Aug 24

Queries

LOW   HIGH
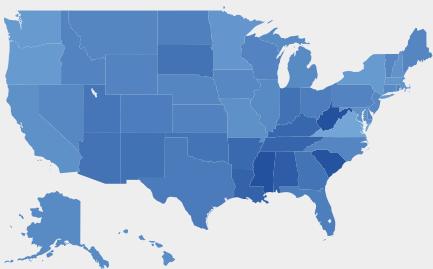
Source: Google Data, June 15–Aug. 24, 2014, United States.

These regional trends are likely dictated by local school calendars. (Interestingly, "when does school start?" is one of the top back-to-school searches on Google, with more than 70% of those searches on mobile.[12]) The earlier kids go back to school, the sooner searches begin. Looking at searches state by state, it's clear that one national back-to-school campaign won't suffice. A flighted approach to merchandising and promotion lets marketers meet local demand at its peak—when it's most likely to have an impact.

Pop quiz: What are the four things to remember this back-to-school season?

1. Be early and be online. More consumers are using the web to research purchases, and they're starting sooner than ever. Use this growing window of time to influence decisions, so you're top of mind when they head to stores.

2. Bridge search to store. A great mobile web experience and mobile-specific ads, such as location extensions or local inventory ads, can make the transition from research to purchase (whether in store or online) a quick and seamless one.

3. Watch rising product trends. Use Google Trends to see what people are searching for in your category. That way you can stock and promote your merchandise accordingly. Rising back-to-school trends can also be a good indicator of [popularity this holiday season](#) and beyond.

4. Take a regional approach. Product demand can vary across the country, so take that into consideration when planning media flights and in-store promotions.

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Sources

1 Google Trends, June–September 2013 and June–September 2014, United States.

2 Google Trends, January–June 2014 and January–June 2015, United States.

3 Google Search Data, January 2012–June 2015, United States.

4 Google Consumer Survey, July 2015, United States. Based on U.S. online population, n=514.

5 Google Consumer Survey, March 2015, United States. Based on U.S. online population, n=1,038.

6 Google Search Data, 2014, United States. Classification based on search terms that include the phrase "back to school."

7 Google Search Data, January–June 2015, United States.

8 Google Consumer Survey, March 2015, United States. Based on U.S. online population, n=668.

9 Google Trends, January 2013–June 2015, United States.

10 Google Trends, January 2010–June 2015, United States.

11 Google Search Data, June 15–Aug. 24, 2014, United States.

12 Google Search Data, January–June 2015, United States. Classification based on search terms that include the phrase "back to school."