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# BACK TO SCHOOL

partnership planning strategy.



Partnerize

Economic shifts and ongoing tariffs are reshaping the landscape of back-to-school shopping. As consumers adjust their strategies, it's more critical than ever for advertisers to have a robust plan. This back-to-school partnership planning strategy ebook will help you get ahead this retail shopping season by providing the insights and tactics needed to navigate these changing behaviors and connect with value-driven shoppers.

## The tariff effect: How trade wars are changing back-to-school shopping habits

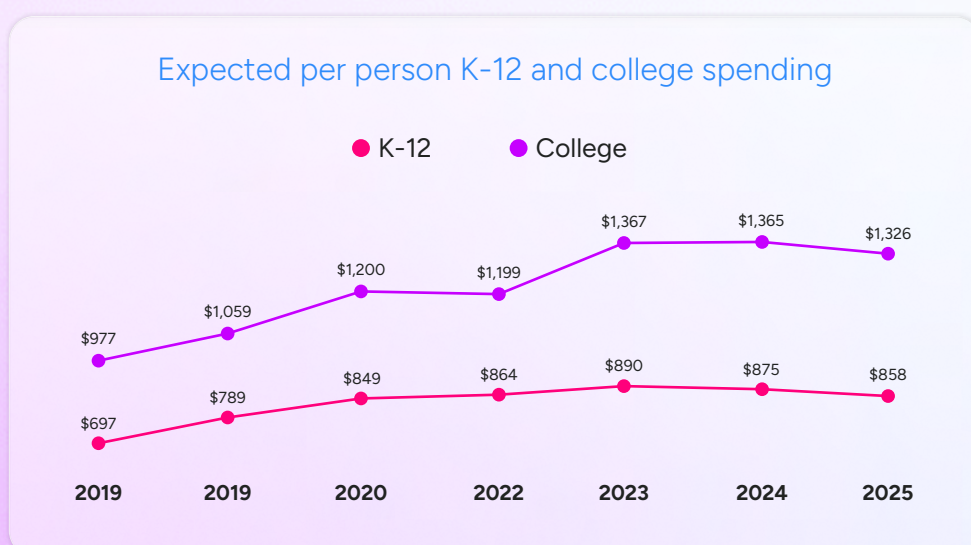
As households across the country prepare to send kids back to school for the 2025-2026 school year, there are obvious effects of the ongoing tariff wars and they're hitting not only pricing but consumer behavior as well. While the teeter-totter tariffs wear on parents' retail confidence, many consumers have become more price-sensitive than before triggering earlier back-to-school shopping than in previous years. In fact, the [National Retail Federation reports](#) that 67% of shoppers already began their shopping prior to July.

Consumers are also focusing on value. A [Deloitte survey](#) found that 75% of parents would shift brands if their preferred choice was too expensive, and many are willing to shop at more affordable retailers or buy refurbished items. Further, many shoppers are also relying on sales and promotions to maximize their budgets.

## So what does all this mean in terms of the numbers and what consumers are spending on?

According to the NRF, families with children in elementary through high school will spend an average of \$858.07 for back-to-school supplies, which is a decrease from \$874.68 last year. Despite this, the total projected spending for K-12 is expected to reach a record \$39.4 billion. The spending breakdown for K-12 students looks like this: an average of \$295.81 on electronics, \$249.36 on clothing and accessories, \$169.13 on shoes, and \$143.77 on miscellaneous school supplies.

College students and their families are anticipated to spend an average of \$1,325.85, a decrease from \$1,364.75 in 2024. Overall, back-to-college spending is projected to reach \$88.8 billion, up from \$86.6 billion last year, as more shoppers are purchasing across nearly all categories.



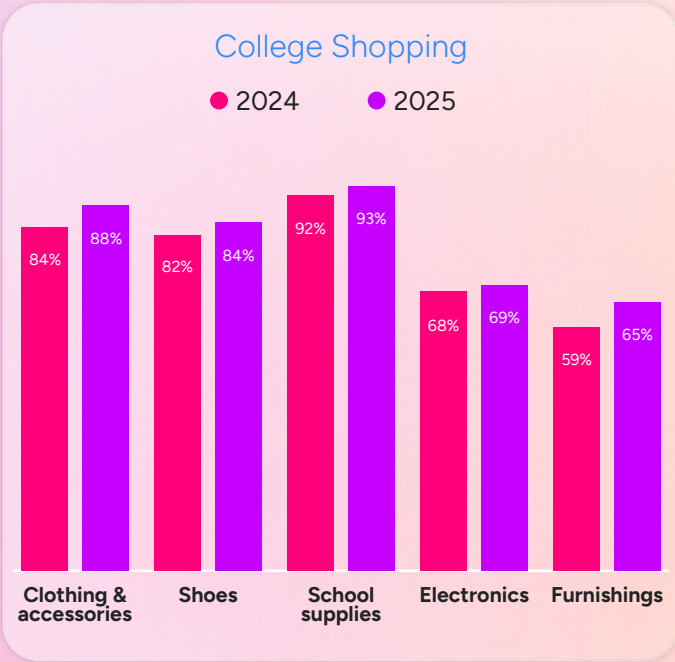
And where are they spending it?

For the 2025-2026 school year, the most popular destinations for back-to-school shopping are online (55%), department stores (48%), discount stores (47%), and clothing stores (41%). For college students and their families, planned spending averages \$1,325.85, a decrease from \$1,364.75 in 2024. Despite this, total spending for back-to-college is projected to be \$88.8 billion, an increase from \$86.6 billion last year, as more consumers are shopping across almost every category. The top five spending categories for college students include an average of \$309.50 for electronics, \$191.39 for dorm or apartment furnishings, \$166.07 for clothing and accessories, \$140.24 for food, and \$117.95 for personal care items.

FACT:

While some retailers have absorbed costs or used existing inventory to shield consumers, prices for many back-to-school items have risen in light of tariff uncertainty.

Top K-12 and college categories by percent purchasing





## Back-to-class shopping 2025

# \$858.07

Average planned spend for K-12, down \$16.61 from last year.

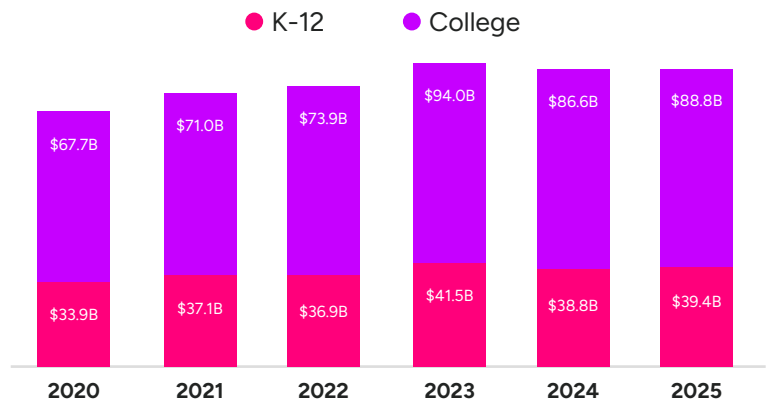
# \$1325.85

Average planned spend for college-aged students, down \$38.90 from last year.

# \$128.2B

Total combined spending for studentsvelementary aged through college, an increase from the previous year attributed to more shoppers than previous years.

Back-to-school expected total spending



**NRF** National  
Retail  
Federation

“Consumers are being mindful of the potential impacts of tariffs and inflation on back-to-school items, and have turned to early shopping, discount stores and summer sales for savings on school essentials.”

NRF Vice President of Industry and Consumer Insights Katherine Cullen

## Early shopping and retail deal days are hot.

According to the NRF, 67% of respondents begun their back-to-school shopping for school and college supplies before July.

## What's the takeaway?

The takeaway is while we know that many eager parents took the opportunity to cash in on big retail deal days, what they were spending their money on was what was important and, of course, it varies by the age of the student.

For younger students in K-12, the top three spending categories are electronics at an average of \$295.81, followed by clothing and accessories at an average of \$249.36, and shoes at an average of \$169.13. School supplies averaged \$143.77.

If you're shopping for college-aged students, the top spending category is electronics at an average of \$309.50. The second biggest category is dorm or apartment furnishings, with an average of \$191.39 being spent. Clothing and accessories came in third at an average of \$166.07, while shoes were not in the top five spending categories.

According to Deloitte, four out of 10 consumers are demonstrating value-seeking behaviors, such as making cost-conscious decisions, prioritizing deals, and forgoing convenience. This trend, which began in the fall of 2024, is also evident in back-to-school shopping habits. Parents are planning to focus their purchases on major promotional events in July, spread out their spending over time, switch to more affordable brands and retailers, and opt for slower, more affordable shipping instead of speedy delivery.

Younger generations are leveraging technology, including social media and artificial intelligence, to find the best deals and compare prices at a higher rate than older parents. This presents a new way for retailers to engage with younger shoppers. Consumers who use social media in their shopping journey spend 1.8 times more than those who do not.

Retailers also have other opportunities to drive sales. Nine out of 10 shoppers surveyed said their child has a must-have back-to-school item in mind, and 62% of parents are often influenced by their child to spend more. Additionally, over half of the respondents said they would be willing to splurge on a first-day-of-school outfit for their child.

This value-seeking environment suggests that retailers should use the back-to-school season to test promotions, refine messaging, strengthen loyalty programs, and ensure they are effectively reaching younger consumers through the right technology channels.



## FACT:

*Consumers who use social media in their shopping journey spend 1.8 times more than those who do not.*

## Bottom line

Back-to-school consumers are more price-conscious than ever, prompting them to shop earlier and prioritize value over loyalty. To succeed in this environment, retailers must adapt their strategies by focusing on timely deals, strong loyalty programs, and targeted messaging through digital channels like social media to capture the attention of tech-savvy, value-driven shoppers.

## Graduate to a better strategy with content partners

With inflation's persistent influence on consumer spending and back-to-school shopping strategies, content partners are a valuable asset for any brand. The core takeaway is that consumers trust authentic voices, and content partners build this trust by delivering top-notch content that can feature your brand and products.

To maximize your results, leverage these partners to promote full-priced products and explore new opportunities to boost reach and revenue throughout the season. Gifting products to content partners can also increase engagement with their editors, leading to more organic exposure during the back-to-school season.

## Back-to-school social trends



Early shopping to avoid not trending



"Never-go-wrong" items



Backpacks and sneakers

### Tiktok trends

- Back-to-school shopping vlogs
- School supply hauls
- "What backpacks are we getting this year?"
- "Inspo" slide shows
- "What's in my backpack?"
- "Here's what you need for back to school"

## BNPL: Your winning strategy for back-to-school

Buy-Now-Pay-Later (BNPL) partners are an increasingly popular and powerful tool within the partnership channel. They make back-to-school shopping easier and more affordable by allowing consumers to break down higher-ticket purchases into smaller payments over time. To maximize your success with BNPL, here are a few key strategies:

### Allocate budget for paid placements.

To capture the attention of your target audience, invest marketing dollars in media opportunities and features on BNPL sites. This will help new and existing customers discover your brand's presence.

### Promote the payment option.

If your products have a high price point, make sure your audience knows they can use BNPL to complete their purchase. The option to spread out payments interest-free can significantly reduce consumer hesitation.

### Communicate with your partner.

BNPL partners are experts at targeted messaging, so collaborate closely with them. By sharing your goals and target audience, you can ensure your brand is featured in the most relevant placements to reach prospective buyers.

## Tips, tactics and takeaways.

### Offers

Start with a strong consumer offer and message. It's a best practice to develop these as early as possible, as partners fill back-to-school placements well before the season begins. Keep in mind that the current economic climate can extend the traditional shopping season, making offers that last just past back-to-school and into peak season particularly valuable. Effective promotions often include BOGO, dollar-off, and percentage-off deals. If offers change, ensure you coordinate with your partners well in advance to maintain a seamless consumer experience. Create urgency with limited-time offers like "One Day Only!" or "Save 15% Sitewide". Also, highlight "buy online, pick up in store" (BOPIS) options, and make sure all details for in-store or curbside pickup are clear to publishers and consumers alike.

### Establish KPIs Now

As Q4 approaches, it's crucial to establish your key performance indicator (KPI) goals. Back-to-school is a critical final push before the holiday season. By setting clear, measurable goals for revenue, traffic, and other relevant metrics, you can ensure your strategy stays focused.

### Over-communicate with your partners

Your publisher partners are your virtual sales force, so keep them well-informed. Remember that brands not traditionally considered "back-to-school" brands may still be relevant due to supply chain issues or changing consumer needs. This is a great opportunity to communicate your brand's relevancy to partners.

### Category/product promotions

Focus on specific categories and products when running promotions. For example, a site-wide sale could also be marketed as "15% off all school supplies," or you could highlight rewards for using BOPIS. You can also push specific products by increasing the number of SKUs for certain categories, a great tactic for targeting niche publishers.

### Summary

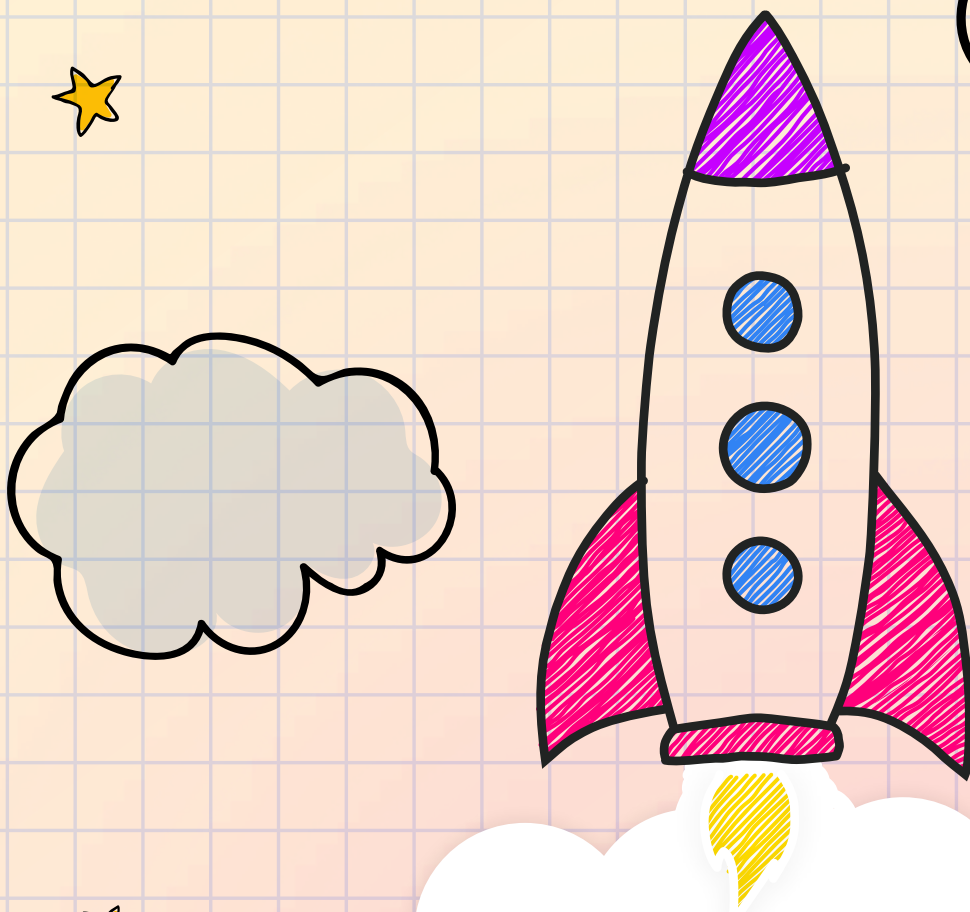
While consumer confidence may be on the rise, a fragile economic recovery and other external factors continue to create anxiety for shoppers. For marketers, having a well-defined plan in the face of this uncertainty can elevate your back-to-school strategy from average to exceptional.



### Partnerize technology tip

As an emerging partner type, many advertisers have yet to find and recruit BNPL partners into their program. Discover, the Partnerize platform's recruitment and activation engine, makes finding and activating BNPL partners easy by sorting results by Partner Type > Buy Now, Pay Later





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## Sources

<https://nrf.com/research-insights/holiday-data-and-trends/back-to-school>

<https://www.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/retail-distribution/back-to-school-survey.html>