

MAKING THE GRADE:

Strategies to Earn an A+ this Back to School Season



TLDR:

The back to school shopping season - the second-largest retail promotional period behind the winter shopping season - is earlier than ever, with some consumers starting as early as May. The audience is larger than ever, too, spanning parents to college students, educators and everyone in between. While the traditional timeframe for BTS is June, if your brand hasn't started their strategy and advertising in May, you won't be able to keep up with the competition when it really matters.

Students are starting their countdown to wrap up the 2023-2024 school year and begin the fun of summer break, but believe it or not, it's time for brands to start thinking about the back to school (BTS) shopping season for next year. Shopping habits are shifting, and parents and students are beginning school shopping earlier than ever, with some consumers starting as early as May.

The time period has long been considered the second-largest retail promotional period behind the winter shopping season, so as consumer habits shift, brands need to follow suit. If you're not already planning your BTS strategy, you're behind.

We're sharing tips for how to get an A this year during the BTS across a variety of channels, from Amazon to TikTok, so be sure to study! Don't worry, there's no test, but 87% of parents and 66% of college students were expected to shop back to school for the 2022-23 school year, so failing here isn't an option for brands.

TIMING

While most school-aged children go back to school in August or September, it's important not to forget the college crowd - a group who will start shopping as early as May, often purchasing bigger ticket items for their dorm rooms or apartments. To be in consideration as parents and students start their shopping, brands should be prepared to launch campaigns and BTS strategies in May or June, and adjust budgets to reflect a search demand peak in August. However, students and parents are often making purchases right up until or even a little after school starts, making the BTS time period a long one.

Your own brand, products, services and of course, goals, should dictate the best start and peak time for a Back to School campaign, but it's important to consider your audience to target them appropriately. For example, technology products are most important for students going to college, who may begin shopping earlier, and items like clothing, footwear and traditional school supplies tend to peak in August.

CREATIVE

Our creative always begins and ends with the shared values between brand and consumer, in conjunction with performance goals. Back to School provides the context through which we shape the concepts. Each brand is a little different, but there are some learnings, insights and guideposts that help us start on second base for BTS season. Here are our top 5:

01 Focus on Emotion and Relatability



What are parents, students, teachers and others going through emotionally? Reluctance to say goodbye to summer, excitement for a change, anxiety about the unknown, determination for a fresh start, a desire to be prepared and more. We tap into that with the stories we tell and solutions we position.

02 Visual Cues



This may seem obvious, but it isn't enough to say "fall" or "back-to-school" to the copy. The visuals should support with seasonal colors, settings, wardrobe and more.

03 Tap into Trends



Rather than copy trends directly, take both copy cues, audio styles and visual transition ideas from what is trending on TikTok to get attention in a way that is relevant for your brand.

04 Focus on the Hook



The first few seconds in a video or headline in a static can make or break performance. Hook quickly with a value, a problem or other relevant line that elicits an "aha" or a "is this real?" or an "omg, finally" response from the consumer and entices them to keep watching and click through.

05 Show the Promo Prominently



For video, keep it consistent through every frame to drive action and memorability. This tactic consistently drives better results than waiting for the end frame.



AMAZON

Amazon has long considered their Prime Day event to be a lead-in to the BTS season. While no 2024 Prime Day dates have been confirmed yet, the tentpole shopping event typically occurs in July. Brands should consider Prime Day and Back to School to go hand-in-hand, and prepare strategies accordingly to not neglect either important event.

When planning advertising campaigns, look at both Prime Day and the longer BTS shopping time period and budget accordingly. Lead-in and post-Prime Day traffic is important to have coverage for, and a steady, consistent presence throughout May-September is critical to reach the wide variety of consumers shopping for school and college. While the longer period of BTS can make it seem like an always-on campaign, some considerations to make it stand out include:

- Leveraging Sponsored Display audiences such as in-market for school supplies to reach customers outside of typical advertising
- Customize Sponsored Brand headlines and store pages for back to school
- Customize creative to feature back to school imagery
- Add video through Sponsored Brands Video and Sponsored Display video to differentiate your products and catch customers attention

On the organic front of Amazon and other marketplaces, the usual tentpole event rules apply: focus on discoverability and retail readiness. Ensure that all ASINs or products that will have promotions are updated with accurate copy, visually compelling (and seasonal!) imagery and complete backend attributes. Remember the [Amazon SEO golden rule](#):

↪ *A consumer can't make a purchase if they can't find your product!*

Convenience is key for the busy BTS season, and enabling various Amazon PDP features such as building baskets and variation strategy can give parents, teachers and college students the ability to check multiple items from their list in one purchase. Variations should showcase a brand's full product assortment of colors and sizes, virtual bundles will pair frequently bought together items and updating product creative and cross-selling offerings within the A+ pages and Brand Store will meet shopper intent.

DISPLAY, STREAMING, & ONLINE VIDEO

With Amazon DSP, advertisers can reach all important BTS purchasers: parents buying for their children, college-age students shopping for themselves, and education professionals shopping for classroom supplies. Each segment will all shop differently, so it's important to have each unique creative that resonates with them. Additionally, starting early is critical with DSP, as it begins to generate awareness and interest before it's time for shopping. While starting DSP efforts in June might be technically closer to the traditional timeframe, if brands don't start advertising in May, they won't be able to keep up with the competition come June.

Granular data can be helpful for BTS campaigns, and some targeting recommendations include:

Parents

Get in front of parents by targeting shoppers buying back to school products, kids lunch boxes, kids fashion and other schooldtime essentials.

Students

Through Amazon's data modeling capabilities, brands can reach student lookalike audiences to expand reach and shoppers whose podcast and music streaming habits imply interest in studying and education. Additionally, Amazon offers a discounted Prime membership and data modeling capabilities allow brands to reach those shoppers.

Education Professionals

Target education professionals by reaching shoppers buying school and classroom supplies, classroom decorations, education software, early childhood education books, science education supplies and much more. Brands can also target Amazon Business customers working in education, whether Early Childhood, K-12, or Higher Education.

GOOGLE SEARCH

On Google, brands should take their audience into consideration: is your brand selling products more geared towards back to school children or back to college young adults? The timing and audience for BTS and BTC campaigns for different types of products can - and should - vary. However, regardless of what your brand is offering, it's important to maintain steady branding and mid-funnel initiatives from May-September so when the most important sales peaks for your brand hit, campaigns can run efficiently and effectively.

A variety of Google Search strategies and products can help inspire conversion during this season, but some tactics Code3 Strategists recommend include:

- Creating key Back to School category landing pages with updated creative and driving traffic there
- Adjust targets for seasonal demand
- Utilize Local Inventory Ads and local ad extensions to promote real time pick-up, especially close to the end of the BTS season
- Highlight promotions and drive demand with Video Reach Campaigns
- Capture and convert high intent with Video Action and Discovery with Product Feeds

SOCIAL MEDIA

If your brand can only focus on one channel for the BTS time period, it should be social media. Reports show college students are most influenced by social media, followed by friends' recommendations and then promotions or coupons. For younger students, 6 in 10 parents look to their kids for what to buy, making the kids themselves the most influential factor in their purchases. However, don't count social media out here: the majority of parents are being influenced by social media and online advertisements.

On social, the back to school time period may begin earlier and go longer, as Gen Z and college students will begin to look for inspiration on TikTok, Pinterest, and other social platforms for their dorm rooms or apartments beginning in May or June. On platforms such as TikTok, conversion rates are high, with 81% of users who made a purchase for Back to School last year reporting that TikTok played a role in what they bought, and 50% of parents planning to purchase something for BTS through TikTok Shop. Snapchat reports 86% of Snapchatters used the app when back to school shopping last year, and 3 in 5 BTS Pinner's saved shoppable content to their Pinterest boards last year during the back to school season.



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Regardless of your channel mix for back to school, it's clear this timeframe is something brands should be tapping into if your target audience includes college students or parents. There are a broad variety of channels and tactics to leverage on social media during the BTS season, so brands should look at their overall goals and audience data and post organic or paid advertising in some capacity on the social platform where they have the largest presence. Another consideration is being present where their particular audience skews mostly heavily. Simply put: not showing up on social media this BTS season isn't an option.

The BTS season is a peak sales period that can make a big impact on business goals, however, it's also an opportunity to build lasting relationships with consumers. Your products are at the forefront of an elementary schoolers everyday, a college student's new adventure and being a part of a parents favorite "first day of school" snapshot. By understanding the landscape, leveraging data-driven insights and embracing the digital channels where your audience spends their time, your brand can win the busy BTS season and years beyond.

**Could you use a
strategic partner to
help navigate back
to school and other
tentpole events?**

GET IN TOUCH