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In-store shopping experience still reigning champion for back-to-school season

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The Back-to-School (BTS) season is officially underway in the United States, and more than one-third (34%) of consumers have already begun shopping, according to the International Council of Shopping Centers' (ICSC) BTS Consumer Spending Survey. Consumers still prefer physical stores for BTS shopping, with 83% of their purchases involving physical stores, including 7% of purchases that will be made online and picked up in-store. Of those who will order online and pick-up in-store, 79% said they are likely to buy additional items once in the store.

Driving in-store BTS purchases in 2015 are the 42% of respondents who still prefer the opportunity to physically examine merchandise before purchasing, while 37% like the convenience of one-stop shopping. The importance of omnichannel continues to grow significantly, as 79% of respondents plan to use a mobile device while shopping in-store for BTS.

Of those planning to use a mobile device while shopping in a physical store, 44% will use their phone to compare prices, 28% will use digital coupons, 26% will check ratings and reviews, 24% will check inventory and availability of items and 17% will email or text friends and family for a second opinion on an item. As expected, millennials are the most likely demographic to use their smartphones while shopping.

"Retailers are enjoying a strong start to the BTS shopping season after a sluggish first quarter of 2015," said Jesse Tron, spokesman for ICSC. "While typically viewed as an essential expenditure, BTS shopping also highlights many of the trends occurring in the shopping center industry. As physical spaces merge with digital to further enhance the omnichannel experience, consumers are shopping in physical stores, participating in webrooming and using mobile technology at shopping centers. It's good news as we progress into the all-important latter half of the retail calendar."

The share of consumers expecting to spend more this year increased significantly year-over-year to 67%, compared to 50% of shoppers in 2014 and 39% who expected to increase spending in 2013.

When discussing why consumers plan to spend more this year, 29% of respondents stated it was because of a need to replace wardrobes and school supplies, while 30% cited a change in school requirements. Additionally, 12% of respondents plan to spend more to keep up with changing fashion trends.

BTS shoppers are planning to buy a variety of products, including school supplies (76%), apparel and shoes (75%), electronics - including computers, phones, accessories and wearables (53%), backpacks and bags (45%) and eyeglasses (22%).

Marketing, deals & trends
are driving BTS shopping

Marketing appears to be the main driver of BTS shopping, as 74% of consumers report that they will likely start BTS purchasing when advertisements from major retailers begin to appear. While those

cues from advertising play a major role in consumers' decision to start BTS shopping, the survey found that nearly half (46%) of consumers believe they will get the best deals in August, compared to 30% in July and 15% of respondents who believe the best deals will be found Labor Day weekend or in September.

The results show August leading the BTS season, with 53% of BTS spending taking place in late summer, and the remainder of shopping split between June (10%), July (21%) and September (17%).

Discount retailers prevail,
apparel specialty stores
increasing in popularity

ICSC found that discount stores are still the leading BTS shopping destination, with 77% of consumers turning to discount retailers for their BTS shopping needs. Another of this year's winners is apparel stores, where one-quarter (25%) of consumers plan to shop this season.

Overall, BTS shoppers plan to shop at a variety of store types that also include office supply stores (40%), online-only retailers (29%), department stores (38%) and wholesale clubs (22%). Only five percent of respondents indicated they would use catalogues.

When choosing a retailer, the top three factors indicated were price (76%), convenience (48%) and quality (41%).

Beyond a place to shop

The survey found that most BTS shoppers (88%) plan to go to a mall or open-air shopping center during the BTS season, and many will do more than shop. More than half (53%) of shoppers surveyed plan to dine at the food court and nearly one-third (30%) plan to eat at a table-service restaurant, while 28% will see a movie and 17% will attend an event such as a concert, go to the gym or do an activity such as bowling.

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