Advertisers have turned the start of the school year into a bonafide shopping experience

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Monday, August 13, 2007

Ah, the ritual of back-to-school shopping. Time to buy those pens and pencils.

And that new mattress?

Back to school list: Sony 50tv Eclipse gumiTunes cardPampers Charmin toilet paper Sony CD boombox Edy s ice cream Tappan electric range Samsung digital camera Nestle crunch bars Mattress

In recent years, the end-of-summer trip to the mall has morphed into a shopping free-for-all. Merchants and manufacturers are hawking an ever-wider range of goods as back-to-school must-haves or, at the very least, items worth loading up on for the fall.

Consider some recent ads and promotions:
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- A Kmart circular touts "A+ savings!" on products ranging from bathroom tissue to bottled water to (how young are these students?) diapers.

- A Nestle ad heralds a new Crunch Crisp candy bar, with a learn-your-ABCs message: "C is for crispy, creamy, crunchy, chocolatey."

- Circuit City's new back-to-school "Work Hard, Play Harder" campaign pushes everything from laptop computers to that necessity of all scholastic necessities, an Xbox gaming system.

- Mail-order gourmet retailer Zabar's encourages customers to send a "care box" to a college student: "It's basic biology-meets-psychology," says the company's Web site of its $98 offering.

So, how did toilet paper get lumped with loose-leaf paper?

For starters, merchants are under increased pressure to attract customers because of sheer competition. Rochester Institute of Technology marketing professor Eugene Fram notes that retail space has grown by 25 percent over nearly the past two decades: You're now talking 20 feet of mall, big-box and other shopping space per man, woman and child in this country.

The result? "Retailers need to take advantage of every opportunity," says Fram.

And, if nothing else, retailers know that as consumers head to stores in search of the most obvious back-to-school supplies, it only makes sense to try to sell them something else.

The approach seems to have paid off. The back-to-school season is "the second-most significant spending period of the year next to the holiday season," says Scott Krugman, a spokesman for the National Retail Federation, which predicts that back-to-school shopping will reach a record $18 billion this year, up nearly 7 percent from 2006.

But manufacturers and merchants aren't strictly setting the agenda. They're responding to a subtle shift in the marketplace, say retail experts. Just as the holiday season has evolved into an ever-growing opportunity to show your appreciation for others, the back-to-school season has turned into an ever-growing opportunity to take care of your own family's needs.

In that sense, it is about toilet paper.

Chalk it up to more women in the workplace and the new approach to time management that has emerged, particularly when you factor in the structured activities - piano lessons, soccer practice, play dates - that are now part of the child-raising equation.

The bottom line is that back-to-school means back to regular (and regimented) life, so it's time to shop appropriately.

"In the psyche of a mother, the first day of school is New Year's Day," says Maria Bailey, a Fort Lauderdale-based retail expert who's written books on women and shopping (Marketing to Moms, Trillion Dollar Moms) and who hosts the Mom Talk Radio program heard at 11 a.m. Thursdays on WJBW-1000 AM.

Other factors include the spread of tax-free back-to-school shopping periods in many states (Florida's has just concluded) and consumer responsiveness to themed advertising. Scott Marden, director of marketing research for Vertis Communications, a Baltimore-based company that produces advertising circulars, says shoppers are drawn in by those seasonal promotions, be they built around Halloween (think "spooky savings" on everything from candy to laundry detergent) or, yes, back-to-school. (Marketing-to-moms expert Maria Bailey suspects that's because time-starved consumers like the idea of shopping for the seasonal event and...
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stocking up on day-to-day necessities, in one trip.)

And don't forget that schools are asking students to buy an ever wider range of supplies - not just pens and pencils, but also baby wipes and Ziploc bags. (One Palm Beach County school even puts disposable cameras on its student-supply lists.) This opens the door to more non-traditional back-to-school retailers, from army-navy stores to office supply chains.

Retailers seem wise, too, to the motivations of achievement-minded parents. 1-800-Mattress has been promoting higher-end mattresses for kids during the back-to-school sales period by connecting a good night's sleep to academic success. The campaign has prompted many parents to upgrade from a basic $200 mattress to a $500 to $700 one, says John O'Connell, a 1-800-Mattress senior vice president.

"You have to maximize a child's performance," he says.

But parents could just as well find themselves shopping for a mattress any time of the year. And that's why many retail experts question whether this increased emphasis on back-to-school shopping truly boosts the bottom line. Are shoppers purchasing more or are they merely shifting their purchases from one point on the calendar to another?

O'Connell says his mattress company has seen a "definitive" growth in sales because of its back-to-school promotions. But some retail observers remain skeptical.

And some educational experts are troubled by connecting consumerism to the return to the classroom. At its worst, the whole process is "a subtle devaluing of education," says Alfie Kohn, author of *The Homework Myth* and *The Case Against Standardized Testing*. At its best, it's just inane advertising, reminding Kohn of an old Robert Klein routine in which the comedian ponders how department stores honor George Washington by selling mattresses on his birthday.

"They're looking for a hook," says Kohn. "And if there isn't one, they'll make it up."

But will consumers keep taking the bait? The next few weeks will tell. In the meantime, there's another Sunday's worth of circulars waiting to be delivered before the first bell.

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