

BBDO KNOWS

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SMART**

*Back to School,
Back to Work*

Back to School, Back to Work

This year, back to school is not just a date in the diary or a retail occasion, it is a return to a much-missed aspect of pre-pandemic life, and this year many people are also contemplating a return to the office. After an extended period of uncertainty, changing circumstances and being at home, adults and children alike share the experience of returning to new physical environments. For some this is a vast and significant change in routine after 18 months.

After 18 months of remote learning (for some) and working from home (for some), routines and rituals are embedded, and we are going to have to relearn certain things, regain confidence in certain areas, reconsider etiquette in certain situations, and all of this will require energy and time. For example, LinkedIn were recently advising people on how to do small talk in the office again and many parents were seeking advice on how to help their children adapt to in person learning again.

Back to school in 2021 remains an opportunity for a new start, and this year workers in certain regions can share this sense of new. The role and opportunity for brands is to participate in the return by helping reassure in the face of change and facilitate or flex in the context of new rituals.

Heading back to school always spurs feelings of excitement, but this year these feelings are accompanied by apprehension.

Back to school is usually met with excitement, but this year we also feel uneasy and anxious. The same can be said of back to work/office. As the world is slowly re-opening, consumers are having to navigate new, on a daily basis. In response to these feelings, and this newness, consumer sentiments and purchase intents have shifted. Here's what you need to know:

ANXIETY UPON THE RETURN

Back to school in 2021 is taking an emotional toll. 35% of parents are concerned about their children's mental wellbeing due to missing large periods of school in the last 18 months.¹ In the context of such anxiety, spending has been higher and more diversified than ever.

¹ McKinsey, July 2021, [link](#)

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Perhaps in an attempt to regain some control and take positive action, parents and students are spending more money on school supplies this year, there has been a 9% increase on back to school spend on supplies per learner.² But equally, this higher spend is likely due to the fact that costs have increased, it is unsurprising that price remains the no.1 driver of retailer choice in the US for back to school.³ The largest increases in spend on supplies per learner are within the pre-school (32%) and college (13%) age groups.⁴ This is where new rituals are born.

The opportunity around back to school is to understand the mixed feelings and sensitively acknowledge them. There is an element of celebration but it must be carefully balanced with the very real fear. And then there is the ongoing need for price and convenience. Parents and children alike are looking for brands to support them, to reassure them and to equip them for what comes next.

SEARCHING BACK TO WORK

As the kids go back to school, so do the adults, except they are preparing to return to the office. After 18 months of intermittent school and work suspension, people and parents are returning to their jobs with new and improved priorities. As Adweek notes “the surge in search terms related to back-to-work purchases suggests that the trend could rival back-to-school shopping as the academic year approaches. Searches for makeup, office attire, on-the-go snacks and pet cameras have skyrocketed, some by several thousand percent compared to last year at this time.”

Post pandemic, consumers value flexibility, rest days, up-to-date technology and the positive social impact taken by their companies.⁵ 44% of parents who have already returned to the workplace report negative effects on their mental health; offering an opportunity for the redefinition of the workplace in a positive way. Trends like flexibility, sustainability, inclusivity, and support in the workplace can also be embraced by brands participating in the back to work/office conversations.

² Fresh Start 2021, KPMG, May 2021, [link](#)

³ Deloitte back to school survey, 2021

⁴ Fresh Start 2021, KPMG, May 2021, [link](#)

⁵ IPSOS, June 2021, [link](#)

*Back to School, Back to Work***RITUALS REMAIN**

In back to school, spend on online learning tools and technologies has increased this year suggesting rituals that developed during the pandemic will endure even as in person learning returns. Consumers are also favouring online and social media shopping for its accessibility, convenience, and again in response to covid related physical shopping concerns.

The pandemic has revolutionised how consumers approach their back-to-school shopping. In 2021, 41% of consumers are using social media to shop, which is a growth of 30% since the start of the pandemic.⁶ Online shopping, which includes social media shopping, is the most popular for back-to-school due to its convenience and accessibility.⁷ Brands can optimise their online platforms to support this shift towards technology.

The pandemic has also changed what consumers are shopping for. This year, 58% of consumers are spending more on online learning resources than traditional back to school items because of the chance of a hybrid class schedule.⁸ Consumers are focused on preconfigured kits (39%), e-learning platform subscriptions (48%), and online courses (41%).⁹ There has been a 37% YoY growth in technology products in the school supplies space.¹⁰ This growth in consumer spend is partly due to a new category that has entered the back to school supplies space, COVID-19 related items, which includes masks, hand sanitiser, and cleaning materials. Brands can highlight how they are responding to the technological shift in education and enduring rituals.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR BUSINESSES

This year back to school and back to work coincide. Concern, caution, fear, excitement, apprehension and hope are all prevalent emotions. Brands have a meaningful role to play in helping consumers navigate change, find new rituals and routines that comfort and reassure. As we continue to navigate covid, certain occasions take on new meaning, this will remain the case. Brands will need to continue to try to anticipate shifts and the heightened significance of certain events and ensure they show up and show up with meaning.

⁶ Statista, July 2021, [link](#)

⁷ Statista, July 2021, [link](#)

⁸ Statista, June 2021, [link](#) & Statista, June 2021, [link](#)

⁹ Statista, June 2021, [link](#) & Statista, June 2021, [link](#)

¹⁰ Deloitte back to school survey, 2021

ABOUT BBDO KNOWS

BBDO KNOWS is a planning resource for the BBDO network.

BBDO KNOWS offers thinking, strategy, insights and inspiration on key categories, key themes and consumer segments.

If you are interested in learning more about the way BBDO thinks please contact BBDO@bbdoknows.com

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