

▶ Whether attracting shoppers, welcoming people to your city or greeting students, it's time to begin planning.

While students are breathing a sigh of relief that their school year has recently concluded, store owners, city managers and school administrators alike should begin strategizing for the next one now.

Retail trends provide the proof. In fact, the quest for next year's items begins earlier than many might think. In their article, *Back-to-school shopping season starting earlier every year*, RetailDive.com cites that people started searching for back-to-school shopping terms starting around July 11!

"Back-to-school shopping is continuing to start earlier than it has in recent years," said David Naumann, vice president of marketing at Boston Retail Partners said in the article. "This year (2018), shoppers began their search as early as the first

week of July and continued into the end of August and early September."

How enthusiastic are consumers for such shopping? Very! The market for back-to-school goods and services is huge. Industry sources note it's the second biggest time for retailers, trailing only the year-end holiday shopping season.



Of course, retailers aren't the only ones who'll need to plan ahead as the next school year approaches. As we'll explore here, municipalities and educational institutions of all types can also benefit from the "buzz" that accompanies the back-to-school season!

RETAILERS: THINK BEYOND SUPPLIES AND CLOTHING

While those who offer education-related goods such as laptops or tablets, backpacks, apparel and other items stand to profit most from back-to-school shopping, other retailers can also benefit:

- > **Appeal to teachers:** Restaurants, for example, might offer teachers a free meal during the first month of school. Similarly, hair salons or spas could provide educators with special discounts on services for a limited time. You'll gain goodwill and perhaps establish a following that lasts throughout the school year. Consider posters, mailers, window graphics and small-space ads to promote your efforts.
- > **Reach out to parents:** For many moms and dads, sending their children off to school will free up time for other activities. This may be a prime

opportunity for fitness facilities or yoga studios to promote introductory offers or feature special classes during school hours to parents. A free, mid-morning espresso might make your coffee shop a regular stop after a school drop off. Wall banners, postcards, handouts and local newspaper ads are all great ways to spread the word.

- > **Create your own tie-in:** Use your imagination to create a back-to-school connection where none may be obvious. For example, a health food store could prepare nutritious take-out lunches or offer workshops on creating healthy meals. Similarly, a hardware store might package a "dorm room cleaning kit" for departing college students. Advertise your own back-to-school concept with store displays, window graphics or social media posts, among other methods.

> **Launch a loyalty program:** There's no better time to do so! Once school starts and schedules become busier, you'll benefit by giving back-to-school shoppers a reason to keep returning to your location. Announce your loyalty program with in-store displays, posters, banners and direct mail advertising. You'll also want to promote it on your website and in email communications.

MUNICIPALITIES: MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR OPPORTUNITY

Cities that are located next to colleges or universities will want to roll out the red carpet for incoming freshman and returning upperclassmen. Of course, all municipalities can use back-to-school concepts to their advantage:

> **Greet this year's class:** A college town, for example, could welcome the arrival of incoming students and their parents. Vinyl banners stretched across the main street, pole banners, posters and other materials could promote retailers, restaurants and resources within town. Of course, having maps that highlight key sites and local attractions and more will be of value to those who are new to campus.

> **Emphasize summer specials:** The months of June, July and August may be the last chance this year for families to enjoy museums, zoos, parks and other municipal attractions before the school year begins. You might prompt their thinking — and spur their attendance — with emails, building-side banners, wall graphics and roadside signs. Use these communications to underscore the opportunity and perhaps offer a discount or other incentive.

SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES: WELCOME YOUR NEW ARRIVALS

From preschools to universities, all back-to-school promotions point people toward the sites they'll learn, teach or otherwise support! Build on the enthusiasm! Identify your location to first timers and greet all with these promotional and informational messages.

> **Make it a banner year:** To help make sure new residents feel a sense of community with the start of a new school year, stand out by welcoming teachers, parents and students alike. How? Large-size vinyl banners, posters and roadside post-and-panel signs are popular solutions. Of course, carry your welcoming theme inside with wall graphics, floor graphics, window graphics and more.

> **Publicize your activities:** While a warm welcome begins with signage, you'll also want to use the start of the new semester to promote clubs, performances, sports teams and other school-related activities. Make sure all are well advertised with banners, posters, A-frame signs and other marketing materials.

> **Point visitors in the right direction:** Whether a single building, a modest size campus such as at a middle school or high school, or the sprawling grounds of a university (and adjacent town), good wayfinding will be appreciated by all. Easy to read directional signs, combined with large-scale maps, will help ensure people can quickly get where they're going. Use the occasion to review all your directional signage including building name signs and room numbers. Be sure to update your building and office directories, too.



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