

Feelings Season is Here

Brands must take an empathetic approach to this year's back-to-school shopping season

Overview

In an environment overwhelmed by immense social, emotional and institutional change, the hard sell is out for back-to-school 2024 — and empathetic brand communications are in.

This year, it is paramount for brands to understand the deep layers of needs and issues their audiences face. Read on for current data and related implications for the different cohorts who will participate in the upcoming annual sales blitz.

Mental Health Concerns Continue to Skyrocket

Both children and parents grapple with a myriad of emotions as return-to-school dawns.

- According to a [WSJ poll](#), 78% of Americans do not feel confident that life for their children's generation will be better than it has been for them.
- According to the most recent [CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#), more than 40% of high school students felt so sad or hopeless they could not engage in their regular activities for at least two weeks.
- The [Pew Research Center's Parenting in America Today](#) survey found that 40% of parents with children under 18 report being very or extremely worried about their children struggling with anxiety or depression, and more than three-quarters are at least somewhat worried about this.

Implication:

For many students and families, “back-to-school” is more than once-a-year.

Reduce reliance on a single, predictable moment.

Brands must be sensitive to heightened levels of anxiety in youth and the challenges they face as they struggle to identify their sense of self in the aftermath of pandemic disruptions and threats of violence in schools and communities.

When back-to-school conversations pick up during the summer, as retailers announce deals and discounts, explore opportunities beyond the basics to intercept your audiences — especially those for whom financial anxieties might be peaking, including:

- May through August, when Google searches for the terms “grants to go back to school” leapt (Data source: Google Trends, <https://www.google.com/trends>).
- During [tax-free periods](#) throughout the country, when parents flood to stores to take advantage of the holiday, as evidenced by a spike in social conversations (Talkwalker, US, English only).
- The first week in January, as parents and kids gear up for a return to school after the holiday break (Talkwalker, US, English only).

Parents are Changing Channels

Parents, in particular, feel the brunt of back-to-school stress as they gear up to support their children's evolving needs. Like their kids, they're adapting to a new routine and the frame of mind that comes with another school year. **When communicating with parents, brands must realize that Gen X and Millennials do not consume information in the ways that the Baby**

Boomer generation did. They value efficiency and convenience and are more likely to turn to digital channels (e.g., social media, podcasts, email newsletters) to understand what's going on in the world.

- A 2022 survey found that 39% of Gen X and 45% of Millennials report daily use of social media as a news source; by contrast, 48% of Baby Boomers said that they never use social networks for news ([Statista](#)).
- About three in ten adults ages 30 to 49 (29%) get news from podcasts at least sometimes; nearly one in five adults ages 50 to 64 (18%) say they do the same ([Pew Research Center](#)).

The “TikTokification” of online content is shifting content discovery away from a user’s traditional friend, family, and coworker network toward a web of connection based on interests and opinions. For example, in July and August more than 50% of back-to-school mentions stemmed from YouTube, as content creators shared videos of their “shopping hauls” (Talkwalker, US, English only). Additionally, 4 in 10 social media users say influencers affect what they buy ([Pew Research Center](#)).

Implication:

Be additive, not interruptive.

When building or engaging with a community, don’t think about what it offers your brand.

Instead, focus on what your brand can do for the community. Brands need to determine which interest-based communities they can authentically engage within, then pull audiences in by creating content and experiences that add value to these communities.

Your audience is not a monolith.

Brands must have a deep understanding of the subcultures their audiences rely upon and participate in. The rise of online micro and multicultural communities, which are now the majority in some regions, is reshaping how consumers seek and absorb information. **To connect with audiences and influence them, brands need to keep their audience mapping up to date.**

There is an opportunity to engage with culturally relevant and potentially in-language communications. (Consider TikTok: 70% of people say they find a sense of community there, and 76% say they like it when brands take part in special interest groups on the platform ([TikTok](#))).

The Role of the Organization is Growing

As employers navigate these challenging times, they have a role to play in the next monumental public health challenge. [Organizations must lead with empathy and compassion](#), considering the ways changes in benefits, leave policies and office schedules affect working parents.

- Two in five parents (38%) say that their childcare responsibilities have affected their ability to work over the past month ([BPC](#)).
- One in four parents say there have been times in the past year when they could not afford food or housing ([Pew Research Center](#)). Faced with difficult decisions to stretch their discretionary income, parents are carefully choosing what goes in their baskets. We must clearly communicate relevance to earn a coveted spot in those carts.

Implication:

Remember parents are also your employees

According to a recent article in the [Wall Street Journal](#), it's becoming more common for employers to add personal days people can use to account for stresses from outside the workplace, or just for self-care in the pursuit of overall mental health. This added measure of flexibility can be a great way to show compassion and connection during a stressful time for parents — and a valuable new element in the competition to attract and retain employees in a tight labor market. **Instead of considering changes like these one by one, take this opportunity to recast the entire employee value proposition in a way that takes the new reality into consideration.**

Conclusion

The most successful brands constantly adapt and progress to meet people where they are in this rapidly evolving world. To deliver true impact, they must be intentional and empathetic in communications, recognizing that there are many unique sub-groups of parents and students who are looking for support — not just in going back to school, but in the ways they manage their daily lives and the events around them.

In its work with clients and other organizations, bolstered by original research and analytics, Ketchum is able to offer perspectives on these trends from a variety of angles—as well as solutions brands can use to meet the moment. Interested in hearing more? [Reach out.](#)