



Ad Track: Retailers gear up for back-to-school spending

By [Laura Petrecca](#), USA TODAY
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We're still in the heat of summer, but retailers are already trying to put families in a back-to-school frame of mind with a blitz of marketing.

Wal-Mart Stores, J.C. Penney, Kohl's and Staples are among the businesses playing up their school-oriented offerings with new ad campaigns, in-store displays and unique price promotions.

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Retail behemoth Wal-Mart is appealing to tweens and teens with ads that feature fictional singing star Hannah Montana (the Disney alter ego of Miley Cyrus).

It's also targeting parents — mindful that the economy has many families feeling pinched — with a "Do the Math" theme that touts school-supply savings.

A lot is on the line for stores. Back-to-school is Wal-Mart's — and many other retailers' — second-biggest selling season after the winter holidays.

Spending this year on students in kindergarten through 12th grade should be a bit more robust than college back-to-school spending, says Mike Gatti, executive director of the National Retail Federation trade group's Retail, Advertising and Marketing Association.

The reason: Many moms and dads, who typically foot more or all of the bill for younger kids, are armed with federal stimulus rebate money.

"Parents are saving those rebate checks," Gatti says. "They know they have some big purchases" to make, such as clothes and computers.

Yet, even with extra cash in hand, Gatti says, parents will be sensitive about price. "This is definitely going to be a challenging year" for retailers — and incredibly competitive, he says. In addition to playing up discounts, look for marketers "to do some attention-grabbing stuff" to lure buyers.

How retailers hope to make the grade:

•**Helping folks pinch pennies.** Stores that sell school supplies are offering a slew of "1-cent" deals. Office Depot is advertising penny specials on "core back-to-school products," such as two-pocket folders, rulers and protractors, says spokesman Jason Shockley. "It's a tough economy, and this (provides) good value for students, parents and teachers."

OfficeMax also has a "penny offer" that includes single items such as glue or a compass for a penny. And Staples has offered 1-cent deals on pencils, folders and even hand sanitizer — which now is on many supply lists given to students by schools, says Staples spokeswoman Amy Shanler.

•**Tapping into nostalgia.** Last week, J.C. Penney launched a TV and cinema ad that plays off the 1985 teen-angst movie *The Breakfast Club*. "We knew parents would relate to it," says Chief Marketing Officer Mike Boylson. The ad also has a twist for today's tweens and teens: a remixed version of Simple Minds' *Don't You (Forget About Me)* from *The Breakfast Club's* soundtrack.

The new song, more upbeat than the original, is by group New Found Glory. "What's old is new again," he says. "Kids are rediscovering music from the '70s and '80s."

•**Integrating products into TV programs.** Sears teamed with MTV on a made-for-TV movie, *The American Mall*, which airs Aug. 11. The music-oriented show, which will include shots of Sears stores and fashions, follows a group of 18- to 20-year-olds who work in a mall over the summer before they go to college.

•**Tying in with teen and tween icons.** Kohl's back-to-school marketing features musical artists, including Avril Lavigne and Plain White T's. Sears' advertising, separate from *The American Mall*, will feature Vanessa Hudgens, who plays Gabriella Montez in Disney's hot *High School Musical* franchise.

Wal-Mart has Miley Cyrus as Disney's Hannah Montana featured in TV commercials and in-store signs. Wal-Mart is also giving out free 3-D glasses for kids — and adults — to wear during the movie *Hannah Montana & Miley Cyrus: Best of Both Worlds Concert 3-D* on the Disney Channel on Saturday.

On Thursday, Wal-Mart will launch HannahMontanaCalls.com, where folks can sign up to receive prerecorded messages from Hannah Montana, including wake-up calls for sleepy students.

May the force be with them.

The Ad Team has OD'd on showings of the *Star Wars* series, so we wondered how Spike TV, which has a new six-year deal to air the space saga, would draw viewers. The guys' network and ad agency Mother surprised us with outrageously original promo ads showing how *Star Wars* is "an invaluable resource for man knowledge."

TV spots and Web videos have characters such as Darth Vader, Boba Fett and the creepy "sand people" surviving (and thriving) in everyday settings.

In one ad, Vader uses mental power to sink an errant golf putt. When a rival calls that cheating, Vader uses the force to choke him. "Competition can bring out a guy's dark side."

Let the games begin.

With the Beijing Olympics less than two weeks away, NBC Universal today will announce it has sold 90% of its ad inventory. NBC's revenue target for the 2008 Games was north of \$1 billion, and sales are on pace to "shatter" records from past Olympics, crows Seth Winter, senior vice president, NBC Sports & Olympics. "Live sports continue to resonate with viewers. Advertisers know the Olympics are one of the best ways to reach an engaged, mass audience."

NBC plans 3,600 hours of coverage on the seven NBC Universal networks and NBCOlympics.com, 1,000 hours more than the U.S. average for previous televised Summer Olympics.

Go O.

Organic apples are one thing, but organic apple candy? It's one of the new flavors for Hillside Candy's GoNaturally organic hard candy line. Now-trendy-to-eat pomegranate is the other, joining honey lemon, cherry and honey (\$2.79 per 3.5-ounce bag).

For organic lovers who want something more filling, San Francisco inventor Sean O'Connor's "Batter Blaster" is now on supermarket shelves. It's 18 ounces of organic pancake or waffle batter in an eco-friendly pressurized can made with no ozone-depleting CFCs and recyclable steel. Slogan: "Just point, blast and cook!"

The Ad Team is waiting for an organic Twinkie, but thanks to *Wall-E*, we know it's centuries away.

My bologna has a first name.

Reality-show producer Mark Burnett (*Survivor*) has in the works an ad-jingle-writing and -singing show that may air on CBS. Can it revive jingle writing, a dying art on Madison Avenue, as advertisers opt for real and faux pop music hits?

On the roster of judges lined up for the competition: ad agency CEO Linda Kaplan Thaler (who wrote the *I'm a Toys R Us Kid* ditty), former Kiss rocker Gene Simmons and marketer Julie Roehm, known for trying to sell Dodges with lingerie and for being very publicly fired by Wal-Mart in 2006. CBS would not say if advertisers will pay to be part of the competition assignments as they did for Burnett's *The Apprentice*.

The Denny's Dome.

Weary of fast-food giants eating its lunch at breakfast, Denny's is fighting back with "B-FAST 2GO" takeout breakfasts sold in "Denny's Domes," a specially designed lid, plate and base with ventilated areas to keep hash browns crisp and eggs moist. While made of the polystyrene typical for clamshell takeout containers, Denny executives say the domes are eco-friendly.

"Consumers also care about the environment, as we do," says Chief Operating Officer Janis Emplit. Her green math: It's recyclable, and because it does the work of two large clamshells normally needed to tote a full breakfast, the dome "actually used less polystyrene."

DQ merit badge.

Dairy Queen says sales of the Girl Scout Thin Mints Blizzard, out in June, are on track for 10 million by the end of July, the fastest flavor launch since mix-ins made their debut in 1985. Thin Mint Blizzards (\$2.75 for 12 ounces, \$3.65 for 21) include crme de menthe-flavored syrup, with vanilla soft-serve and cookie bits. The cookies are the real deal: DQ paid an undisclosed fee to the Girl Scouts, and a supplier crushes Thin Mints for DQ's 4,625 stores.

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