

# What Do Back To School Shoppers Want?

And what does it mean for brands and retailers



A group of 63 parents of Tweens and Teens were brought into a 4-day Shopping Experience community to discuss back-to-school shopping. Parents shared their ideal shopping experience, then went shopping to show what it was really like! We captured their thoughts and photos of the experience as it unfolded, and uncovered what could have made their experience better, providing unique insights for brand and retailer marketers.



Digsite®

## Key Findings & Implications



### **Parents Want an Organized, Efficient and Clean Experience**

The number one theme expressed by parents was organization. An organized store with clear signage, pricing and promos was associated with a pleasant, relaxing experience while the opposite was seen as frustrating and stressful. Opportunity exists for streamlining store layout and having a dedicated employee for aisle management.



### **Back To School Shopping: A Family Bonding Experience**

Many parents viewed back to school shopping as an annual ritual, complete with its own set of traditions. They also view it as a time to bond with their child and prepare for the coming school year. Opportunity exists to capitalize and enhance on this experience, particularly with parents.



### **Parents Go Where the Price is Right & Promos are Attractive**

With multiple kids to purchase for, parents are constantly on the look out for the best deals. Specifically mentioned are ones that allow parents to optimize the amount of product purchased for the least amount of cash. BOGO deals, \$ off deals and % off deals are attractive to parents. There was some desire for more bundling to simplify the shopping experience.



### **Web Apps Used But Could Do More**

Both Tween parents and Teen parents mentioned their use of apps was primary for price comparison and redemption of either in-store gift cards or rebates digitally. They were interested in getting more from apps, such as using them to eliminate having to carry paper coupons.



### **Stop Treating Shoppers as a Number – Get Personal!**

Some parents felt as if they were merely “a number.” They mentioned they would like a more personalized/exciting experience to make it more memorable and exciting for their family.



### **Don't Assume Tweens & Teens Need the Same Experience**

Teens were clearly more involved in purchase decisions vs. tweens. Creating ways for teens to take the wheel on shopping decisions while reducing the frustration of parents is a potential opportunity.

## 29

### Teen Community Participants

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Primary Shoppers

Mix of Genders

At least one child attending school in the fall and between age 13-18 years old

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## 34

### Tween Community Participants

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Primary Shoppers

Mix of Genders

At least one child attending school in the fall and between age 10-12 years old

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Using a Digsite Shopping Experience template, two identical communities were created for two different audiences – parents of tweens (10-12) and parents of teens (13-18). The Digsite template communities made it fast and easy to create a custom research study.



The community ran for 5 days, during which time participants completed a total of 4 activities comprised of 11 tasks.



Task types included surveys, whiteboard exercises, community discussion and a live shopping exercise that had parents share in-the-moment experiences at their shopping locations.

## Activity Schedule

Recent Experience

Shopping Habits

Live Shopping Experience

Evaluate Experience

1

2

3

4

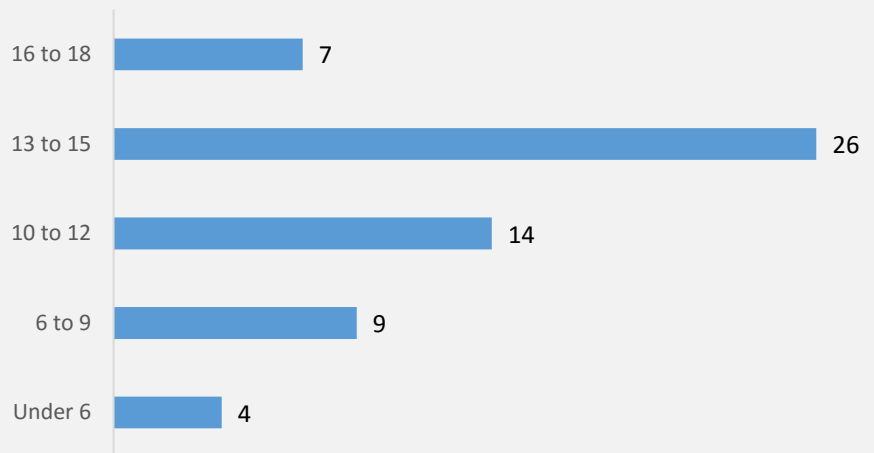


Participants were recruited using Digsite's SocialFind™ recruiting

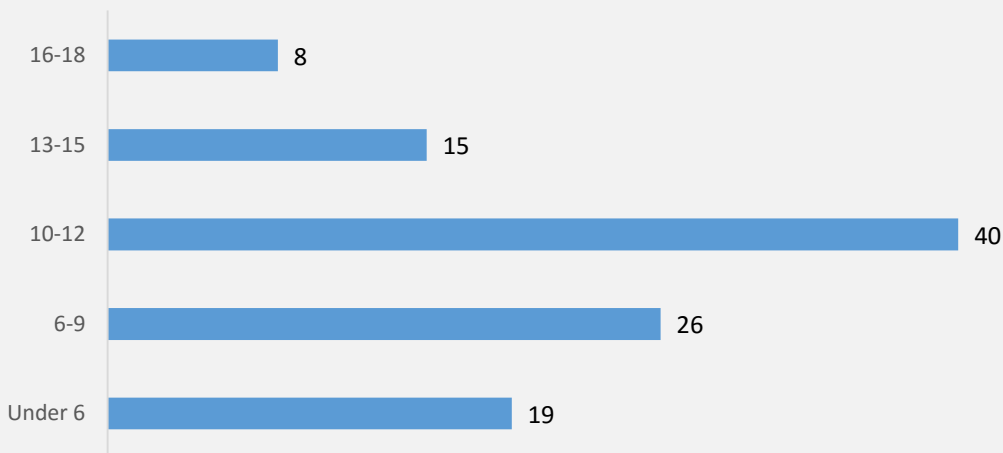


Participants were primary back to school shoppers in their household, or share the responsibility equally.

Teen Community: Age Range of Participants' Kids



Tween Community: Age Range of Participants' Kids



The Tween community focused on recruiting parents of children ages 10-12. The Teen community focused on recruiting parents of children ages 13-18.

## Sample Participant Profiles

*"Hello, my name is Amy and I have two boys, ages 13 and 10. We live in a suburb of Kansas City Missouri. My favorite part of shopping for Back to School items is that it creates excitement for my boys in heading back to school. It's fun to sort through our extra supplies from last year, decide what we need for this year, get everything organized, and have backpacks ready for their first day."*

**Amy B.**  
Tween Parent  
Instore Shopper

*"Hi, I'm Kristen, from Idaho. I am shopping for a 14 yr old girl, a 12 yr old boy, and a 7 yr old girl. I love shopping for the kids but my oldest is hard to shop for because everything I like she says is lame! So hopefully we can agree on some things. Hoping to go shopping sometime this week!"*

**Kristen M.**  
Teen Parent  
Instore Shopper

# Activity 1: The Ideal Shopping Experience



## The Activity

Parents were asked to share their current back-to-school shopping habits by taking a brief survey. Then, they engaged in an online discussion to expand and share their “ideal” back-to-school shopping experience.



## Key Findings

### Late Summer Primetime for Shopping

86% of participants indicated that their shopping generally starts a few weeks to a month prior to the start of school.

### The Basics: An Organized, Efficient and Clean Experience

Parents in both communities desire an experience that is organized, efficient and clean. They want the store to have specific sections containing all back-to-school materials, have clear signage, prominent pricing and promotions and assistance available if necessary. They also expressed a desire for store cleanliness.

### Back To School Shopping: A Family Bonding Experience

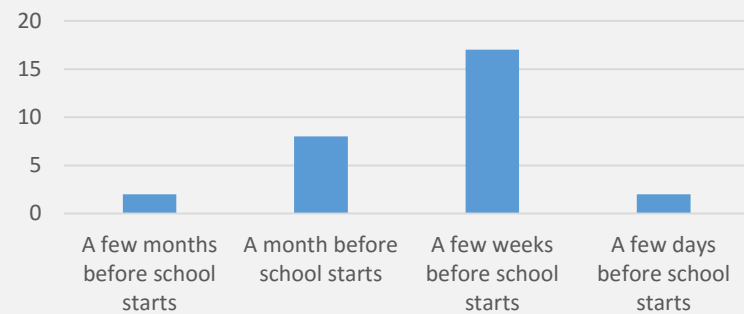
Interesting to note that parents aren't purchasing online for back to school. They prefer to be in the store with their children/family. Parents of Tweens view this generally as favorable. Teens are more involved in the decision making process, which causes stress for parents.

### Price Comparison a Staple for Back to School Shopping

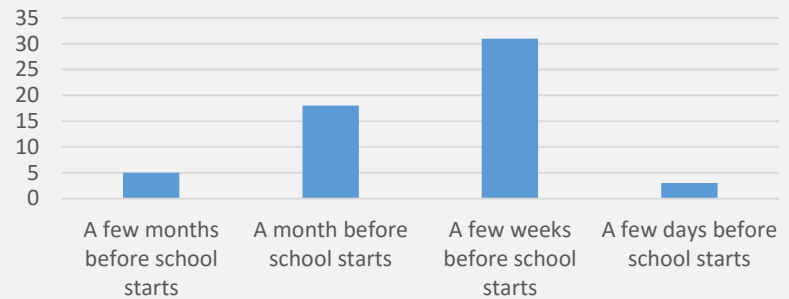
Almost all participants indicated that they are constantly comparing prices for the products they purchase to see if they are getting the best deal. Most schools issue a list – participants will use apps, coupons, papers, etc. to compare prices of each item to find the best deals.

## Which best describes when you typically **\*\*start\*\*** shopping for Back to School items?

Parents of Tweens



Parents of Teens



## Describe your "Ideal" Back to School Shopping Experience

Ideally we find everything we need in one spot, with good options (but not too many!) and good prices. If we can get everything we need, I feel accomplished, and nostalgic - I loved shopping for supplies as a kid.



**Eliza**  
Tween Parent

Love taking her to the mall and having her walk around and see what styles are out. More the variety the better. She likes to wear clothes to be comfortable in, which is great. Don't want those calls from the school about her shirt to tight or shorts to small. We usually go as a family, my husband, daughter and myself. In case daddy doesn't like something, he can veto it before we get it home. I feel great after we have a day of shopping, she gets to pick what she wants, we approve it and all go home happy!



**Christina**  
Tween Parent

I try and do back to school shopping as soon as the sales are up so she has the best choices at the best prices. For me it is exhausting, but I now there is an light at the end of the tunnel and I try to buy some extra so I do not have to do school supply shopping again any time soon.



**Mindy**  
Teen Parent

Store is clean, well lit but not blinding. I prefer to shop in person, to try items on. Stores that play music too loudly are a turn off. Ideally it is me and one of my kids at a time. Some friends (mine and theirs) is nice, not essential. If all goes well, it is a laid back process I find enjoyable.



**Stephanie**  
Teen Parent



## Activity 2: Influencers on Shopping Behavior



### Objective & Methodology

Parents were asked in a Digsite conversation activity to discuss some of the biggest factors they consider when choosing where to. In a follow-up activity, parents were asked to share the promotions/sales they particularly looked for and how they used mobile applications to shop.



### Key Findings

#### **Parents Go Where the Price is Right and Promos are Most Attractive**

With multiple kids to purchase for, parents are constantly on the look out for the best deals. Specifically mentioned are ones that allow parents to optimize the amount of product purchased for the least amount of cash. BOGO deals, \$ off deals and % off deals are attractive to parents.

#### **Web Apps Were Used for Price Comparison & Promo Redemption**

Parents of both Teens and Tweens indicated that their primary use of web apps was to compare prices and redeem coupons. Mentioned specifically were Cartwheel and Walmart Savings Catcher. They did not make purchases online.

#### **Conflicting Feelings On Email Promotions**

Parents of Tweens see emails as “noise,” but parents of Teens look for emails to tell them about the deals. Parents of Tweens mentioned it would be nice if they could get “text notifications” of deals.

#### **Coupons Need to Be Worth the Extra Effort – Perhaps Even Digital**

Traditional coupons are seen as “hassles” and need to be worth the extra effort. Parents of both groups called for Digital Coupons that could be accessed via their app.

#### **Teens More Involved in the Shopping Experience – Market to Them!**

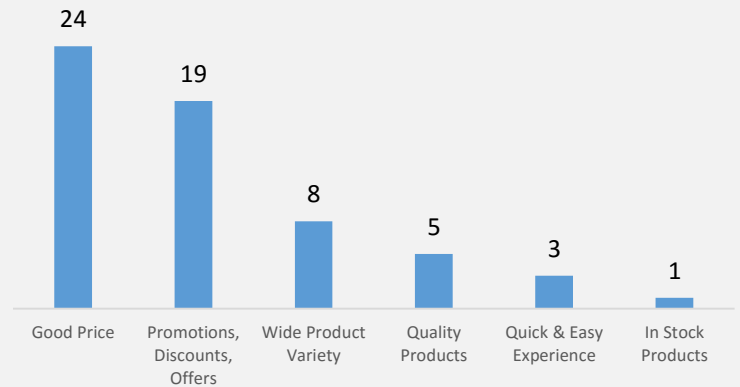
Though the parents will have the ultimate say, it is clear that teens gets the more control they have over what is purchased. Clothing in particular is a popular item, but also shoes, backpacks and general supplies.

## What do stores or websites need to provide so that you choose to shop with them?

Parents of Tweens



Parents of Teens



## What factors influence your decision of where to shop?

I know there are stores with better prices but I will pay more to have a better shopping experience. I like to have a variety of supplies to choose from so that the kids have a better selection. I also prefer brand names on certain products such as crayons and glue so I want to be able to purchase the brands I like.



**Stephanie**  
Tween Parent

Major factors for me when shopping in-store is having a clean store to shop in (organized and clutter-free), and also being able to have a short check out time. Losing/wasting time during the last couple of weeks before school starts is a major thing in my book.

Major factors for me when shopping online is having the option for free shipping (to home or to store if local). Some websites that I have tried to shop for leave their webpages full of ads which looks like a cluttered mess. When I shop, I generally know exactly what I am looking for and do not need ads popping up and making suggestions.



**Christina**  
Tween Parent

They need to provide trendy clothes that my kids like. They also have to have a good deal like buy 1 jeans get 1 free to keep cost as low as possible.



**Lindsey**  
Teen Parent

I don't shop for school supplies online at all. I like seeing the merchandise before purchasing and since I usually purchase soon before school starts I like to make sure it is on hand when needed. Price is ALWAYS an important factor. That along with quality. Makes no sense to buy something inexpensive if it will break after a short time. Price and quality have to match up. But I am a sucker for notebooks for .17 cents. Also, there needs to be a healthy supply of merchandise. Nothing is more frustrating than going to a store for an item on sale only to be told they ran out of them on the same day the sale started.



**Amy**  
Teen Parent



## Are there certain types of promotions, coupons or offers that you like to take advantage of?

Variety & low prices. Different options of supplies from economical to well priced.



**Sarah**

Tween Parent

Promotions may play a roll depending on how good they are. Same as coupons. Advertisements don't usually play much of a role in my decision making. Emails, I don't read often. I don't have many mobiles apps for stores, but some that I do influence where I shop. I think coupons and sales influence me the most, especially if they have huge sales, discounts, or b1g1.



**Stephanie**

Tween Parent

Target sometimes has \$10 off grocery purchase of \$50 mobile coupons. I would definitely use something like that on school supplies. I don't bother much with clipping coupons. But I use apps like Ibotta and Checkout 51 as well as the Walmart savings catcher. These are all coupons you redeem after purchase via uploading your receipt.



**Susan**

Tween Parent

Places like Kohls, Justice, Childrens Place, Rue 21 and Shoe Carnival are stores that 90% of the time will have coupons or bogo 50% off sales so if they are not currently offering it I will wait until the next week when they will be.



**Kimi**

Teen Parent

I think a BOGO always gets me interested. I have 2 kids to buy for so that saves me money. However, it's irritating when the store has a special & they don't order enough & you go for the special & there's nothing left.



**Kate**

Teen Parent

mobile apps play a small. roll i would say more of the emails that i get containing special offers, discounts, and coupons play a larger roll in influencing where we shop. the kids also influence me if there are specific items that they either need or absolutely want to start their year if with. I think bogo and percent off promotions are the ones i am more influenced by



**Emily**

Teen Parent



### Watch-Outs!

**Clearly Communicate Promos & Availability of Products**  
Participants indicated a great deal of frustration stems from not understanding promotions or finding that items are out of stock. Retail outlets need to clearly communicate promotions and alert consumers ASAP if they run out of stock.

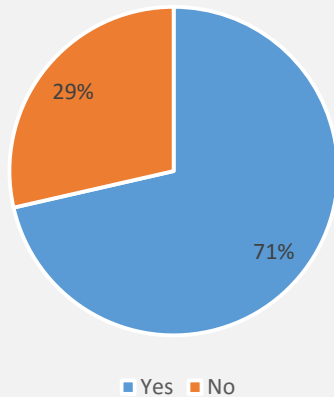
#### Coupons Better Be Worth It

Spending a lot of money pumping out print coupons? It may be a waste. Participants indicated that they do not bother with coupons unless the deal is really worth it. They don't view it is worth the hassle. Potential exists to introduce digital coupons.

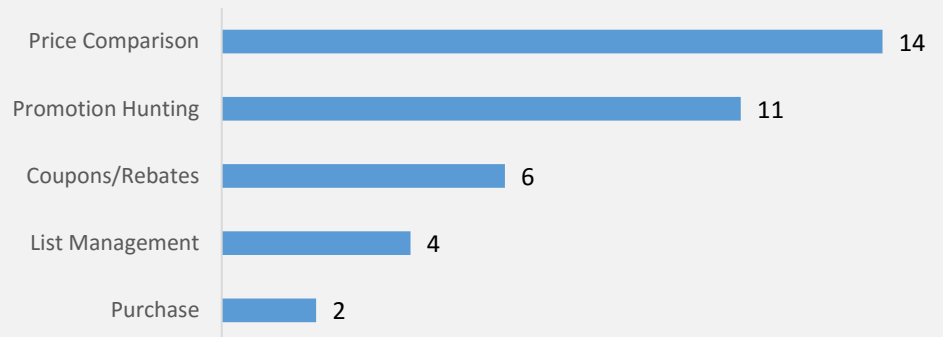
*"I dont have time for all the store specific apps and coupons. I have three boys that need to be watched while i shop for all theses school supplies. I would love to use coupons but never see any that are worth the extra effort." - Debbie*

Do you plan to shop with a mobile app this year? If so, how will you be using it?

## Parents of Tweens



### How will you use your mobile app?



Everything from Shopping online, to rebate apps and coupons. Also just to be able to quickly browse sales and plan too



**Hope**  
Tween Parent

I'll use them to view sales & deals and use any in-app coupons that are applicable to my purchases.



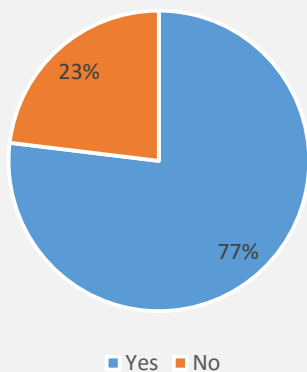
**Amber**  
Tween Parent

I use apps to compare prices. Sometimes an in store special might not be a real deal also an app to place my supplies in and compare prices with the stores in my area

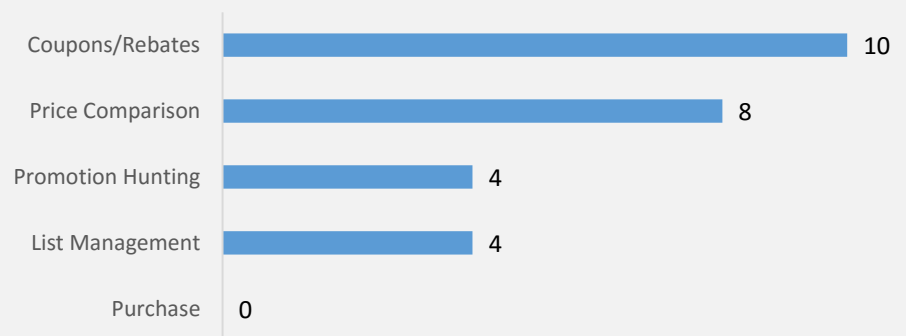


**Sarah**  
Tween Parent

## Parents of Teens



### How will you use your mobile app?



I use my mobile device to have supply list on hand. I also check out sale prices online versus in store.



**Danielle**  
Teen Parent

Retail me Not for sales and coupons, Shopkick for points, store apps for coupons



**Stephanie**  
Teen Parent

I have several different shopping apps , shopyour way and the walmart app. That way I can see what deals are going on and I can save money with both of them



**Kristen**  
Teen Parent

## Activity 3: Live Shopping Exercise



### Objective & Methodology

Participants were asked to go shopping and record their experience. After their experience, or during, they were to share their experience in a series of conversation activities, providing photos/video when applicable.



### Key Findings

#### Majority of Shopping Experiences Were In-store, With Children!

While the three in four shoppers did their shopping in-person, teen families were more likely to shop on-line. Target and Walmart were the most mentioned retailers.

#### Main Complaint: Lack of Store Organization

Parents were most frustrated about store disorganization, claiming that it made it hard to navigate the store, find prices and promotions and maintain their concentration. Those with good experiences mentioned there was a dedicated employee to keep things organized and answer questions – a potential opportunity for retail outlets.

#### Apps Used for Price Comparisons & Promo Redemptions

Both Tween parents and Teen parents mentioned that their use of apps was primarily for price comparison and redemption of either in-store gift cards or rebates digitally.

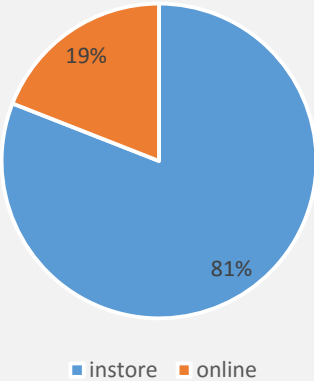
#### Lack of “Unique Experiences” From the Trip

Despite the hype about personalization, Parents generally did not feel they got anything unique from retailers. Most commented on a promo or a deal they received.

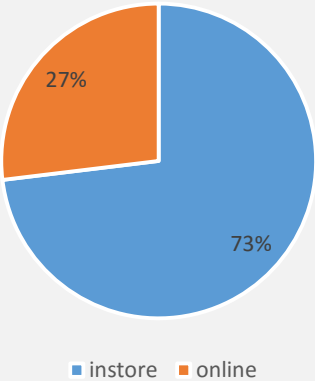
#### Back-to-School Displays can Create Nostalgic Atmosphere

These parents generally felt in-store shopping was a bonding experience with their children. Many mentioned they were excited to see the store set up for back-to-school with themed promotions – it provides a sense of nostalgia. Opportunity exists to capitalize on this feeling of nostalgia and bonding to provide a unique, stand-out experience.

Instore or Online (Parents of Tweens)



Instore or Online (Parents of Teens)



## Retail Stores That Were Shopped



Parents of Tweens



Parents of Teens

## Share Your Experience! Highlight anything unique or particularly noteworthy with your experience.

This year's back to school shopping was the easiest and fastest yet. Tax free weekend I had a really early dentist apt with my kids, got done by 7:30 am (thought appointment would take longer) no stores were open yet, then I remembered Walmart is open 24 hours. The Walmart we went to didn't have a supply list for my kids school, but luckily I was able to find them on the school website. I started looking for everything on the list and surprisingly I found EVERYTHING my kids needed. I let them help find it, i picked out the brand and they pick the color. I had no complaints from anyone. Maybe because it was to early for them. I liked the fact that the store was not busy. Got in and out, found everything we needed, no crowd or mess and great prices.



**Jennifer**

Tween Parent, Walmart

I shop at Target for school supplies. This is our second grade list for this upcoming school year. The whole experience went really well. The store had about 97% of what I needed in the store readily stocked. It was pretty neatly organized and the school supply section is in the back away from foot traffic which is nice. I was surprised they didn't have an only black pack of dry eraser markers, but I ordered them from Amazon while I was in the store.



**Amy**

Tween Parent, Target

I didn't feel like any of them were unique. I wish it were. They all seem the same. Most produced offers, similar stock, similar pricing. It's like all of the stores meet in June and try to match each other. I didn't get any personalized promotions or coupons.



**Kate**

Tween Parent, Walmart

What the stores do is have a special sections for Back to school. Usually they will have some stuff that you do not usually find in the regular school supply area. I usually look forward to this. I like seeing unique and cute stuff for school. I did not receive any special promotions or coupons. That would have been nice and would probably make me spend more. Hee hee.



**Nancy**

Tween Parent, Target

At Walmart where I did the bulk of my shopping I don't feel as if anything was unique. There were no promotions just the lowest prices. There was a bus outside though where people handed you a list of things that you could donate for needy kids. I bought several of those items as well. I received emails from walmart.com for school supplies but they were items that cost way more money if you bought them online



**Shannon**

Teen Parent, Walmart

I really don't feel that the experience was unique in any way. I saw that they were having a sale on school supplies and since I don't have a proper list as of yet I went and purchased basic supplies. I had to coupons nor did I receive any email promoting anything I might be interested in. Although that is definitely something that I would love. It was a random morning when the store was not crowded. Uneventful but none the less kind of fun.



**Lillian**

Teen Parent, Target

I did not use a list but my daughter knows pretty much what she needs.

We went to target because they were having a sale. We also went to Hot Topic because they had a stuff a back pack sale , where you get the backpack for 25% off and everything that you fit into the back pack for 25% off.

Shopping this year was really easy and I saved quite a bit by shopping early.



**Mindy**

Teen Parent, Target

I did not use a list this time. I went to my local Walmart. I liked that everything was very organized and laid out well. Most prices were visible. There were three separate Isles dedicated to back to school supplies. The prices were good too. The thing I did not like was that they had backpacks in 2 separate places in the store so we had to go back and forth to see them all. I let my daughter pick out the backpack she liked. I only saw 1 item with no price displayed



**Kim**

Teen Parent, Walmart



## Snapshots from the Experience...



"Here's what the store looked like. Not too big of a mess..." – Della, Office Max



"I love the bins at Walmart, though!! I always get a lot. I like to buy a bunch of crayons, markers and art supplies." – Kate, Walmart



"Nice and organized lots of options, and prices clearly marked!" – Hazel, Fred Meyer



"Liked that the stores I went to were actually organized! – Monica, Walgreens & CVS



"I wish the dedicated area was bigger with more space to shop." – Cheri, Walmart



"The deals on some things were good." – Sara, Kohls



Size Chart

Size: Select Size >

5 Colors: Black/White >

Price: \$31.94 - \$59.06

Add to Cart

"I was able to find and purchase everything i needed in under 10 min."

– Denise, Amazon.com





# Follow-up Activity



Digsite.

Many of you say you want to go to a store that is organized. What do you mean by that? Please give me some specific examples of what an organized store is (or isn't).

Organized to me means that things aren't mixed together in bins, that pens and pencils are together, folders and paper, etc. More categorized by item not by brand, etc. The biggest part though is the not mixed together bins and crates - drives me crazy!



**Cameron**  
Tween Parent

I want things orderly, in the correct place and organized logically, with like things together. I also don't like things to feel cramped and overcrowded. I also like prices to be clearly labeled.



**Amy**  
Tween Parent

This to me is exactly unorganized. Folders, composition books, filler paper and spiral bound notebooks are all in one aisle, yes. But the stacks make it difficult to pick through. The prices are completely scattered about and inconsistent.



**Susan**  
Tween Parent

I think a store like TJ Maxx is not organized. A store like Walmart is fairly organized. One thing that drives me crazy is when different retail stores in different cities organize the store differently. I want Walmart to always have the same layout. I want Meijer to always have the same layout whether it's in Indiana or Ohio or wherever, so I can find everything easily.



**Christa**  
Tween Parent

Needs to have isles clean where carts can move freely without stuff being on the floor. Shelves should look tidy. I don't want to shop in a store that looks like my teenagers room.



**Elizabeth**  
Teen Parent

An organized store has everything clearly labeled. Items are displayed with like items. Prices are in clear view and reflect the actual price. It should be neat and well maintained. It should not be a shelf of random products bunched together.



**Lillian**  
Teen Parent

For me organized means you can find what you need and the shelves are neat. For example, I was just at 5 different stores looking for book covers. One of the stores I went to was Dollar General. That store drives me nuts because it looks like they just threw everything in there and everything is everywhere. If they had book covers, I would not have found them because there is so much stuff



**Ladonna**  
Teen Parent

Organized as when I go to a department I can find what I'm looking for or an employee who may assist me. Items priced accurately so that I don't hold up the line when checking out at the register. I would love to be able to get a similar item or raincheck for out of stock items if I shop the first day of the sale. Especially during back to school shopping.



**Joyce**  
Teen Parent

## Activity 4: Improving the Experience



### Objective & Methodology

Participants completed a survey about how their experience could have been improved. They were asked to expand on their answers in a series of follow-up conversation activities.



### Key Findings

#### Parents Call for Greater Organization for a Relaxing Experience

Majority of parents wished for a more “relaxing experience,” quoting that the store’s lack of organization caused additional stress to their experience. An organized store increases shopping efficiency, decreasing the need to “hunt for items,” making their trip fast, easy and productive.

#### Clearly Communicate Prices & Promos

Along with organization, parents called out the need to clearly communicate prices and promotions for individual products.

#### Stop Treating Shoppers as a Number – Get Personal!

Some parents felt as if they were merely “a number.” They mentioned they would like a more personalized/exciting experience. One comment mentioned that it would be nice to serve coffee (or wine) at changing rooms for parents. Bottom line – parents are looking for new and exciting experiences to enhance their family time.

#### Don’t Overprice Items Just to Offer Attractive Promos

These shoppers are savvy – extensive price comparisons have given them a good idea of what items should be worth. Inflated prices with slashes stand-out, and it’s not attractive to them.

#### Opportunity: Back to School Bundles

Most schools issue a back-to-school list. Parents mentioned it would be nice to have a bundle ready for them to purchase based on this list. Retail outlets could make this bundle available via an app and have it ready for parents upon arrival.

## Advice to Retailers – How Can Customer Experience be Improved?

When I shop for Back to School items, I want the experience to be more like Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory. For example, when I shop I want to be able to play games and eat snacks which will help me stay less stressed! I want it to be an "ultimate" experience that I have with my kids all in one spot! That would be really cool.



**Amy K**

Tween Parent

I want everything in one spot. Kleenex, wipes, etc. should be with the school supplies. I don't want the shelves overcrowded. Too many items do not make it easier, but rather more confusing. I want to be guaranteed the lowest price on all items at one store, all which will help me save money and time.



**Susan**

Tween Parent

I want back to school shopping to be more relaxing. My kids come along, we're bouncing between the different lists. Let's get an attendant that is on hand to ask questions and find products. Check out at the school supply area would rock. We all feel like we're annoying the rest of the world with our gigantic piles of highlighters and glue sticks. Better yet, create base packages of all the things that are on the local lists. Cartoons would be nice for when the kids lose interest.



**Jennifer**

Tween Parent

I want my shopping experience, to be a non-stressful one. The store should have an ample amount of products, along with a variety of each as well. Mothers want to try to get the best deal possible, so we can shop around, and if you only have like one brand of crayons to choose from, we will go somewhere else! ;) The stores environment needs to be a clean, as well as organized. It is probably hard to keep a store organized during school supply season, but that would ensure that everyone can see exactly what products the retailer offers.



**Monica**

Tween Parent

When I shop for back to school items I want the experience to be more relaxing. For example when I am trying to look for items off of my list it would make it so much easier if things were neat and in order with clear pricing signs. This would help me so much by making a stressful time a little easier



**Shannon**

Teen Parent

When I shop for Back to School items, I want the experience to be less stressful than it can be. For example, when I shop I want to be able to find the items I need all together in a "back to school" department which will help me shop quicker. I like getting in and out of a store and getting what I need without having to hunt it down in various departments. I like organized spaces in stores. I also would enjoy music playing, not too loud. I notice some stores have no music at all (Target) and some are way too loud where you can't hear yourself think. It often makes my mood lighter to have music playing in the background while I shop, since it's not my favorite thing to do.



**Janine**

Teen Parent

For me it would be ideal if the retailer had the list of items needed and I was able to have the drop shipped directly to me in one package. That would be ideal. I would not have to do anything but pay.



**Hazel**

Teen Parent

would love to possess magic and be able to change outfits like Sabrina the teenage witch does in her intro on the show ...would save on shopping altogether but since I cant. ...maybe more chairs at dressing rooms for parents and wine( I mean coffee...LOL) and other little things to help de-stress the process for harried parents while kids try on items.



**Vickie**

Teen Parent

## Download the Digsite Sprint Fact Sheet

We used a Digsite Sprint™ to gather these in-depth insights, fast and without breaking the bank. A Digsite Sprint™ enables marketers to perform powerful qualitative research without the time commitment required of traditional methods. If you're interested in learning more, download our fact sheet!

[Download the Digsite Sprint™ Fact Sheet »](#)