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*Ann Marie Lindig and her sons
back to school shopping
photo by Chris Fritchie*



Shopping the Back to School Way

By Debbie Vallejo

THERE ARE 75.5 MILLION children enrolled in school throughout the country, including Pre-K through college. Last summer over six billion dollars was spent nationwide on clothing during the month of August. The only time of year Americans spend more on clothes is during the Christmas season. Back to school shopping is a huge part of the American economy and Frisco certainly contributes its fair share.

BEATING THE CROWD

The time to begin back to school shopping obviously depends on the

sense of urgency a particular family feels when contemplating the start of another school year. Some like the slow and steady approach, quietly gathering school supplies and new clothes throughout the entire summer. For these slow and steady gatherers, the end of one school year is a signal to begin shopping for the next. On the other end of the spectrum are the procrastinators who sprint out the night before school starts, picking up everything from #2 pencils to socks and shoes. Most shoppers fall somewhere in the middle, starting the process a few weeks before commencement of a new school year

after taking a much needed break from anything scholastic for the first half of the summer.

Ann Marie Lindig is a mother of three school-age children and shops for school items throughout the entire summer. She doesn't find the experience quite as stressful as some parents. "I just follow the supply lists provided by the schools and have the kids help me shop," says Mrs. Lindig. "I'd rather not fight the crowds so we shop off and on most of the summer."

Wal-Mart began marking down prices July 4th in an effort to prepare for early

back to school shoppers. "Operation Unbeatable" rolled into Wal-Mart stores at the beginning of July and slashed prices on 16,000 items. Jami Arms is a spokeswoman for Wal-Mart stores. "We know parents are starting to shop earlier in the summer," says Ms. Arms. "We want to be ready with great prices when the parents are there to shop." A little more than 75 percent of shoppers go to discount stores like Wal-Mart, Kmart and Target--an indication that the stores are targeting the back to school market with particular clarity.

THE MARKET

Every retailer wants a piece of the action and tries new ways to entice customers. In an effort to appeal to college students, Wal-Mart partnered with Facebook to provide college age learners with a tool for discovering their personal back to school needs. A college student, plus roommate, can jump online and take a quiz that will generate a list of products each needs for the perfect college experience based on their particular personalities and what they already own. Of course, the list will also contain plenty of items that are more "want" than "need."

Timing, product placement and prices are all an integral part in cornering as much of the back to school shopping market as possible. This past shopping season saw the average family spending approximately \$500 on back to school shopping. The majority of the money goes to clothes, around \$220, with a little more than \$100 on electronics, another \$100 on shoes and the remainder on school supplies.

SHOPPING AS EDUCATION

Clothing is one of the more difficult aspects of back to school shopping because it's not as objective as simply

purchasing items on a supply list. Finding appropriate attire that meets both parental and student approval is often a negotiation of monumental proportions. According to Cynthia Townley-Ewer of organizedhome.com, there are ways a family can limit the tension caused by disagreements about pricing and the appropriate style of back to school dress. First, discuss the school dress code before

of two teenagers wishes they could learn more about money, yet the majority of families miss the back to school shopping experience as an opportunity for teaching financial responsibility.

There are several resources available online for parents interested in making "back to school" more than just a time to pick up supplies. Jumpstart Coalition is a group dedicated to helping families

discover ways to increase financial literacy in their children. Citibank and Capital One also provide information on their websites for parents and educators.

Allowing students to participate in the process also creates excitement for a new school year. "I follow the supply list provided by each school and let the kids help me shop," explains Mrs. Lindig. "They pack their own backpacks and make sure

they have all the supplies they need. It helps generate excitement for a new school year."

TAX FREE

Texas shoppers saved \$3.7 million during the tax-free weekend of 2006 at participating Wal-Mart and Sam's Club stores alone. "We've done a lot to make sure shoppers have an easier time finding what they need," says Ms. Arms. "We created livebetterindex.com which explains how to shop during the tax-free weekend and what is included on the tax-free list."

There are definitely some positives for choosing to make a mass shopping extravaganza out of the August tax-free weekend. For every \$100 spent on items covered on the list, a family can save a little over eight bucks. Wal-Mart has



photo by Chris Fritchie

shopping begins. Most students will know the dress code already, but it's still worth repeating. Second, pull out clothing from drawers and closets and make a list of clothing needed to compliment items in the current repertoire. This avoids purchasing items a child or teen already has. Third, outline budgetary limitations for back to school clothing. Make sure the kids know how much is available to spend. Be realistic. Don't budget \$10 for footwear when a student needs three pairs of shoes, but put a reasonable limit on a shoe allowance so students are not expecting more than is reasonable for the family.

Besides making shopping less stressful, outlining a back to school budget ahead of time creates learning opportunities for students. According to Capital One's Annual Back to School Survey, one out

shorts on sale for \$5--that's a new pair of shorts for free if you look at the tax dollars saved. Most stores keep the back to school sales going during the tax-free shopping weekend, so shoppers have a pretty good incentive to come out in large numbers.

The drawbacks of shopping tax-free are the crowds and the tendency to overbuy because of the perception of big savings. For those over-zealous shoppers, keep in mind the limited savings. Remember it is only \$8 for every \$100.

BACK TO SCHOOL TIPS

Here are a few back to school shopping tips to store up for next shopping season. First, pick up the supply lists ahead of time. Find where the sales are and pick up items separately, you'll save money. If it's convenience you're after, grocery stores have prepackaged supply packs that carry the majority of what a student will need. Second, don't overbuy, especially for secondary school students. Follow the generic supply list and then be prepared to head back to the stores after the first week of school. Usually secondary teachers have more items students will need for individual classes.

Third, grab a few extras of the things that are on sale during back to school shopping season, but will probably not stay on sale throughout the year. Mrs. Lindig usually picks up the supplies she knows will need replenishing throughout the school year. "I pick up extra index cards, notebook paper, pencils, pens and other things the kids will need to replace before the year is over," says Mrs. Lindig. "Don't go crazy though. It's real easy to buy more than you have to."

Fourth, utilize the shopping experience as a way to teach the kids about creating a budget and sticking to it. Find some online resources with ways to explain how a budget works and why it's important for kids to learn how to handle finances.

Lastly, make sure to get a copy of the school dress code before shopping for new school clothes. In doing battle with a teenager, or even a five-year-old, it's nice to have an ally, even if it is a piece of paper.

Debbie Vallejo is a freelance writer living in Frisco.