

Back to McLuhan

Where are the big ideas? How do we know? Those questions dominated my visits to a dozen stores, each catering to the Back-to-School shopping crowds. Over a three-day period, I visited two Wal-Marts, two Targets, one Costco, one Sam's, a Kroger, an Albertson's, Tom Thumb, Whole Foods, two 7-Elevens, a CVS, a Walgreens, an OfficeMax and an Office Depot.

Instead of differentiation, I saw a commodity message: "Back-to-School, Back-to-School, Back-to-School." What does that mean? It means a lot of brands and a lot of retailers aren't doing much of anything except ticking off a lot of kids!

Truth at retail comes from observing shoppers through their eyes — what they think, how they feel and what they do. What I saw during my visits was without emotional content.

If we agree that retail is a medium, then what's the message?

Cut-and-dried. Cookie Cutter. Uninspired. The retailer's calendar says "Back-to-School" and the messages — and the signs — take it literally.

It's been that way as long as I can remember.

Sales promotions have always been driven by the retailer's calendar. Using the *Farmer's Almanac* as their guide, retailers laid out these holidays and planned their merchandising accordingly. It's become perfunctory and rote. Why are we surprised when these lackluster efforts produce lackluster results?

When I was in sales, my job was to optimize the ads and feature a reduced price to get maximum display activity to make our numbers. I'd spend trade funds on incentives in hopes of aligning the retailer's calendar with the brand's objectives. Sometimes it all lined up and sometimes it didn't.

That was good enough back then. Not anymore. If we are truly serious about shopper marketing (and we

are) then why are we squandering a great opportunity to connect on a higher level with our shoppers during the Back-to-School season?

For me, Back-to-School is more freighted with emotion than any other time of the year. That was true for me as a child and it's even truer for me as a parent. When September rolls around, I can't help but think back to my son's first day of kindergarten. I stayed home from work that day. Do you know how many times I've stayed home from work in my life? Never, except this one time. I stayed home the whole day, just to put him on the bus and worry about him until he got home. I don't think I'm unique.

My son is now ten years out of college, but the memory of that day and my emotions remain. Back-to-School is a big, emotional deal. We should start looking at it that way when it comes to the shopping experience. We're foolish to pass up the opportunity to connect authentically on an emotional level.

We need to let go of the traditional, tactical retailer's calendar and replace it with a new calendar for shopper marketing. The retailer's calendar is all about selling stuff. There's nothing wrong with that. But the shopper's calendar is all about living their lives and having emotion and sentiment connected with that. We need to pay more attention — and connect — with that.

This new calendar is nothing like the old one (*see chart*). For one thing, it starts in August. That's because, for most people, the Back-to-School season is more like a "new year" than the calendar "New Year" that starts in January. September is when everything changes. There's a certain mood to it. It's bittersweet. It's back to the routine.

Most important, Back-to-School is a gateway to a season that also includes Halloween and doesn't end until Thanksgiving. This is a key point. From a shopper marketing perspective, it's not just a standalone Back-to-School event; it's the beginning of multifaceted, seasonal, lifestyle cycle.

THE SHOPPER CALENDAR

Mode	Mood	Idea	Feeling
Booting Up Mid-August – Thanksgiving	Her new year Engaging with real-world new beginning	Imagine the possibilities of a new year	Reminiscent, Proud, Optimistic
Holiday Craze The day after Thanksgiving through December	Fit it all in! Real life put on hold	Enjoy the unscripted memories	Warm, Spontaneous, Genuine, Relaxed
Hibernation January – February	Sigh of relief Rejuvenate & recharge	Catch your breath with the ones you love	Snuggly, Comfortable, Homey, Simple
Spring into Action March – Last day of school	Rebound into action Home, health, HER	Enjoy healthy living	Bold, Empowered, Natural, Whimsical
Recess Last day of school – Mid-August	Break from routine Let kids be kids	Seize the fun	Fun, Unstructured, Lighthearted, Timeless

After August-November, which we refer to as the “re-boot” phase, we have Thanksgiving through December, when we’re in “holiday craze” mode. From New Year’s through February, we’re hibernating, only to ‘spring’ back in March. The “spring forward” phase continues to the last day of school, when we go into recess, until the August re-boot.

Shopper-marketing rhythms and tempo need to match this calendar. That is what should drive the kinds of messages and media we are using. Part of that communication should convey our understanding of an emotional time, a time of change, and, yes, extreme anxiety.

For example, health and nutrition obviously is a big concern parents have for their children. Putting that complete meal together each schoolday morning is also a problem for moms and dads everywhere.

Getting there goes straight back to the eight factors of “shoppability,” as identified by Drs. Ray Burke and Neil Morgan of Indiana University (“Shopping Simplified,” *The Hub*, Sep/Oct ’07). Those factors include things like convenience, service, comfort and simplicity.

They also include “relevance,” which is primarily about the product. How do you take the product and create a fresh context around it, using a shopper-

centric, need-based approach? How can that product fill the shopper’s needs within the context of the emotions of the season?

And they include “affordance,” which means that the benefits and value of each product are clearly communicated. This is especially important in a soft economy, when shoppers are more sensitive than usual to the price/value relationship. It’s not that they won’t spend more, but we need to make sure they understand why our brands are worth it.

The big payoff is enjoyment, because that’s about the emotional connection. How do you inspire your shoppers? You inspire them with a positive overall experience. When you do that, shoppers feel good about the experience and about themselves.

The sales — and shopper loyalty — will follow. ■



AL WITTEMEN is managing director of retail strategy for **TracyLocke**. He has 35 years of experience in marketing, sales and shopper marketing of consumer packaged goods. Al can be reached at awittemen@tracylocke.com or (214) 259-3531.