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Optimove Insights :

Back-to-School 2025: The Empathy Imperative

July 2025

Insights

**How Budget-Conscious Consumers
Are Reshaping Retail Expectations**

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Executive Summary

Back-to-school shopping is a cornerstone of the retail calendar, but in 2025, it's happening under new financial pressures. Consumers are increasingly budget-conscious, cautious about inflation, and deeply concerned about the impact of tariffs. While they remain loyal to brands and prioritize quality, their trust must be earned through empathetic engagement, timely promotions, and personalized experiences. This report highlights key consumer attitudes and behaviors and offers actionable insights for retailers navigating a sensitive economic climate.

In a year where parents are especially cautious with their budgets and deeply affected by inflation and tariffs, brands must go beyond standard promotions to earn trust and loyalty. The rise of Positionless Marketing offers retailers a powerful framework to meet this moment with empathy and agility.

Positionless Marketing empowers retail teams to respond faster and more personally to shoppers' needs by breaking down internal silos. Powered by AI, it enables marketers to independently analyze customer data, generate relevant messaging, and launch personalized campaigns—without needing to wait on separate teams for each task.

In the current back-to-school landscape, this agility is more than a convenience—it's a competitive advantage. Parents want to feel heard and understood. With Positionless Marketing, brands can:

- **Respond to economic anxieties in real time** with timely offers and empathetic communication.
- **Deliver personalization that feels human**, not automated, reflecting real needs rather than transactional urgency.
- **Adapt quickly to tariff-driven changes in pricing or inventory**, ensuring messages are always relevant and helpful.
- **Maintain trust** by controlling message frequency and tone, respecting customer boundaries while still offering support.

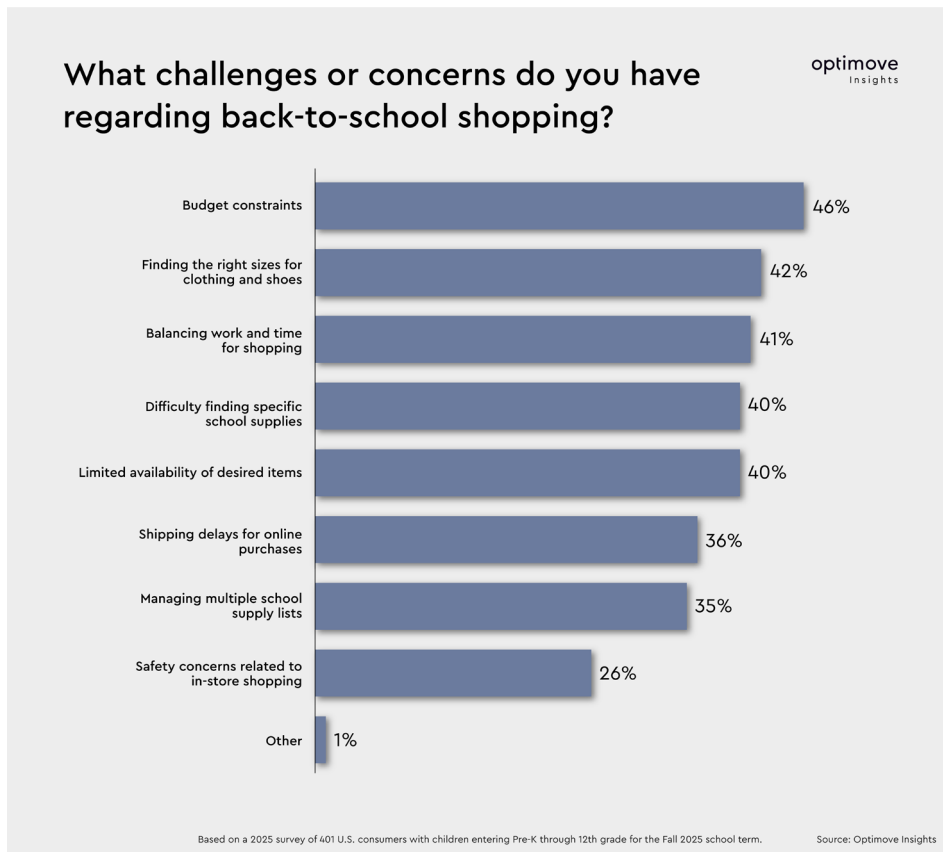
Positionless Marketing enables retailers to be more than just sellers—it allows them to act as trusted partners during a financially sensitive season. By removing bottlenecks and enabling every marketer to take full ownership of campaigns, it's possible to meet each customer where they are, with speed, relevance, and empathy.

Methodology

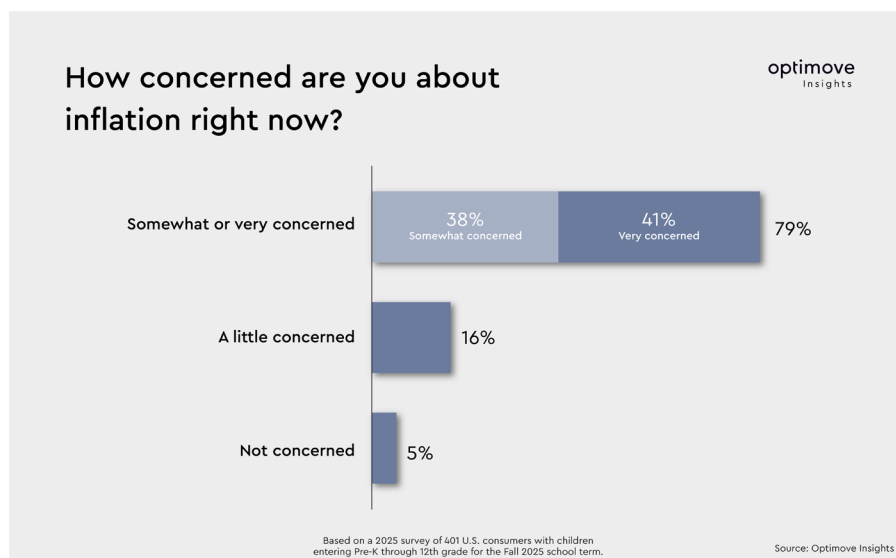
The findings in this report are based on a survey conducted in June and July 2025. The survey sampled 401 respondents across the United States. All participants were parents or guardians of children in grades K-12, with household incomes of \$75,000 or more. The goal of the survey was to understand consumer attitudes, concerns, and behaviors related to back-to-school shopping.

1. Budget Pressure Is the Dominant Concern

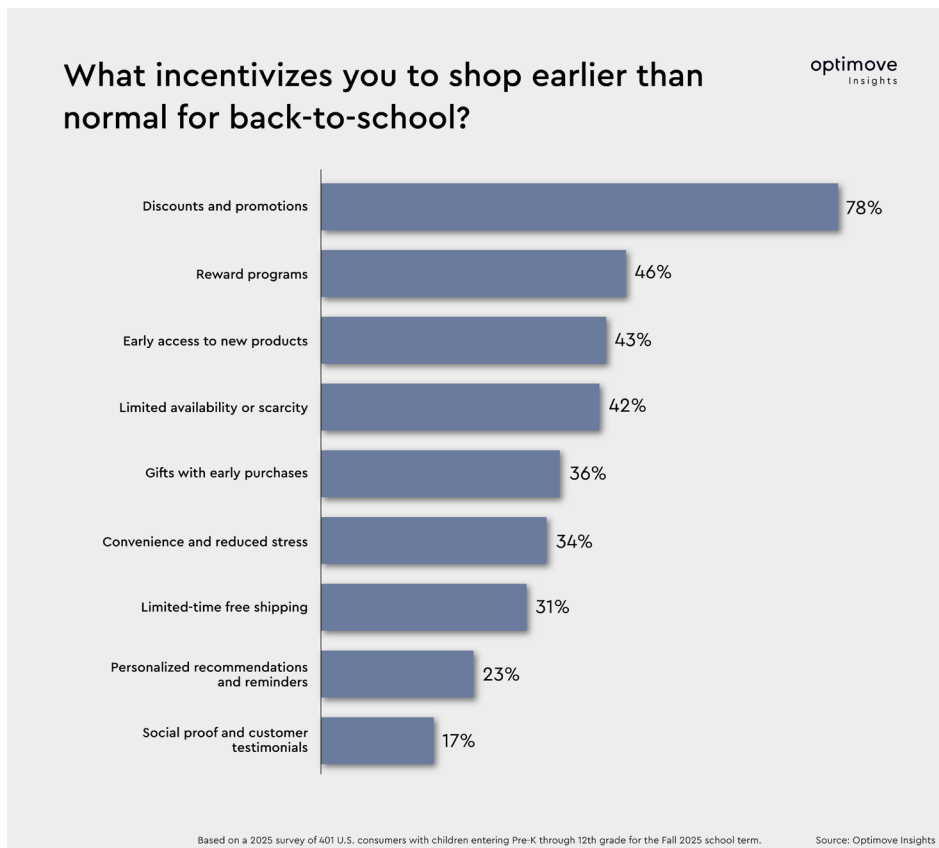
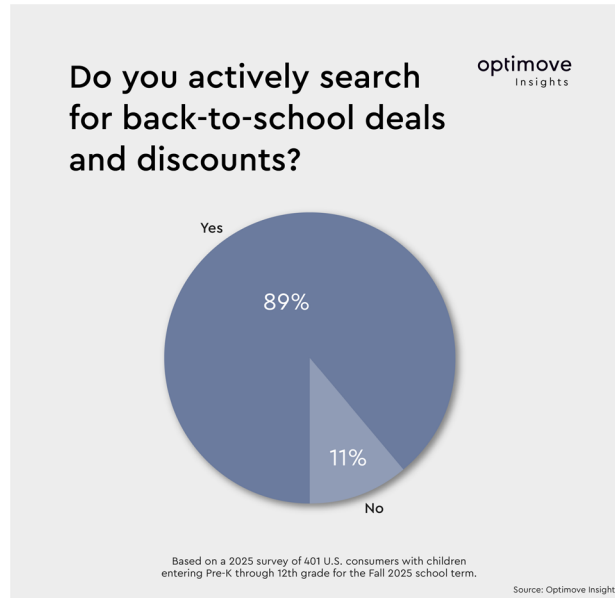
- 46% of consumers cite budget constraints as their top back-to-school concern.



- 79% are at least somewhat concerned with 41% very concerned about inflation.

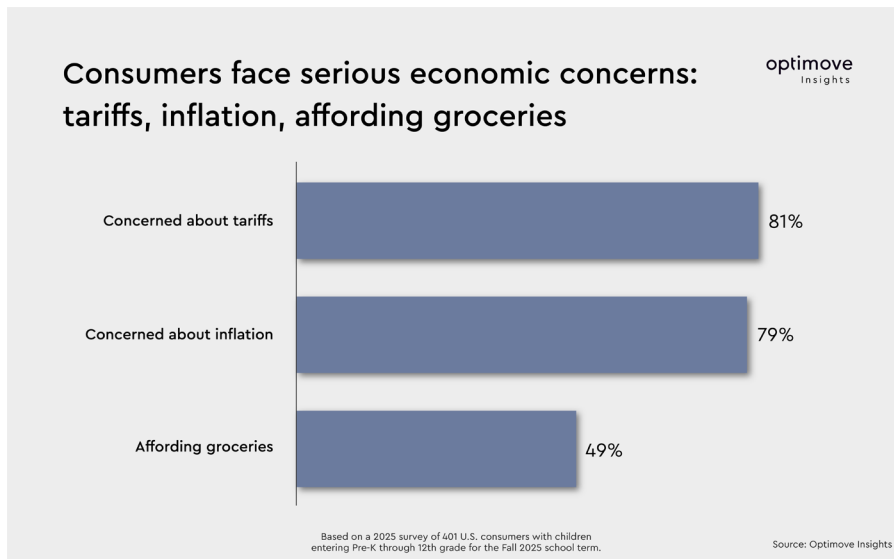


- 89% actively seek out deals and discounts, and 78% say discounts and promotions are the main reason they shop early.



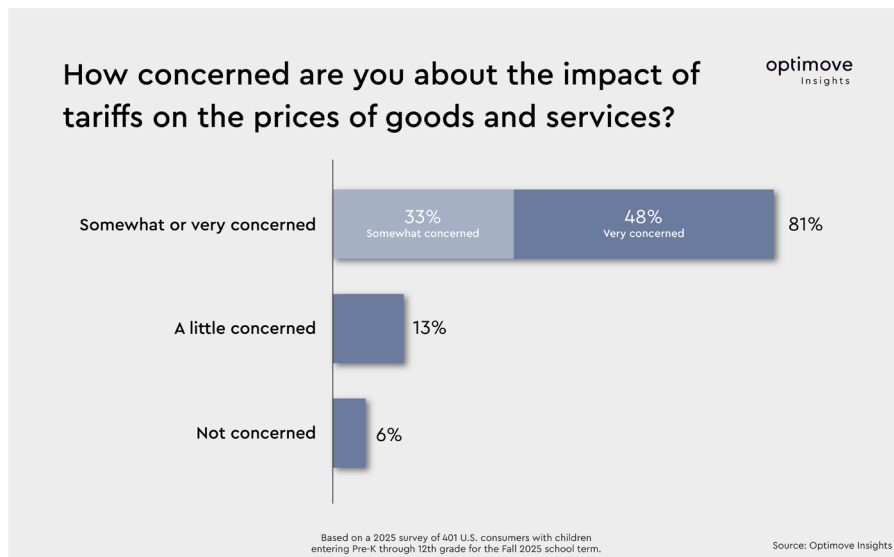
Retail takeaway: Brands must lead with empathy. Messaging should acknowledge economic stressors and demonstrate value with transparent pricing, bundled offers, and loyalty rewards.

2. Economic Anxiety Is Real and Growing

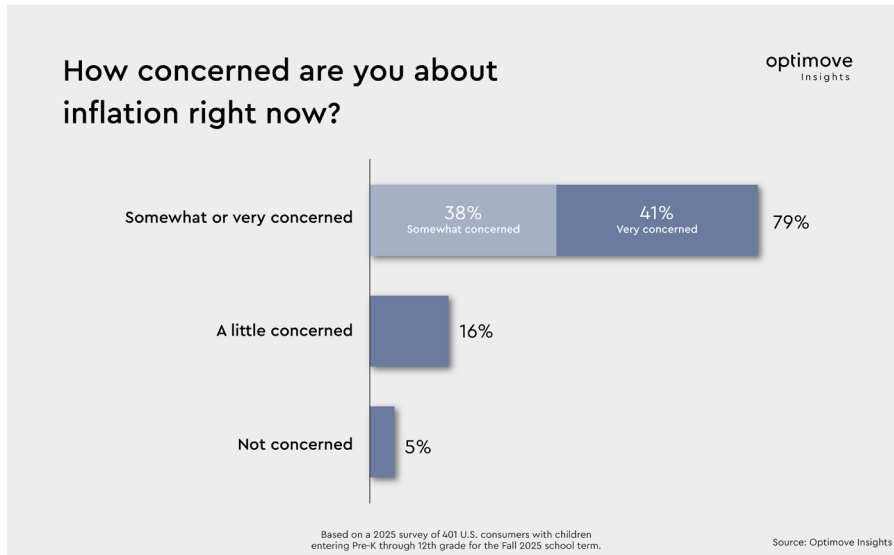


Detailed results:

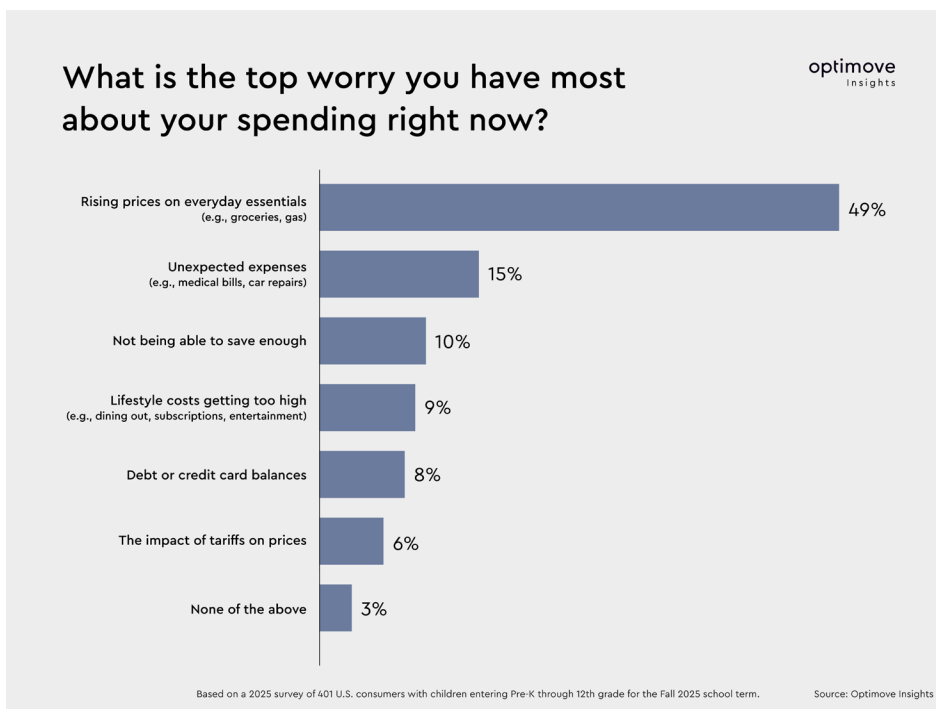
- **Tariffs:** Eight-one percent (81%) are at least somewhat concerned about the impact of tariffs with 48% being very concerned.



- **Inflation:** Seventy-nine percent (79%) are at least somewhat concerned about the inflation with 41% being very concerned.



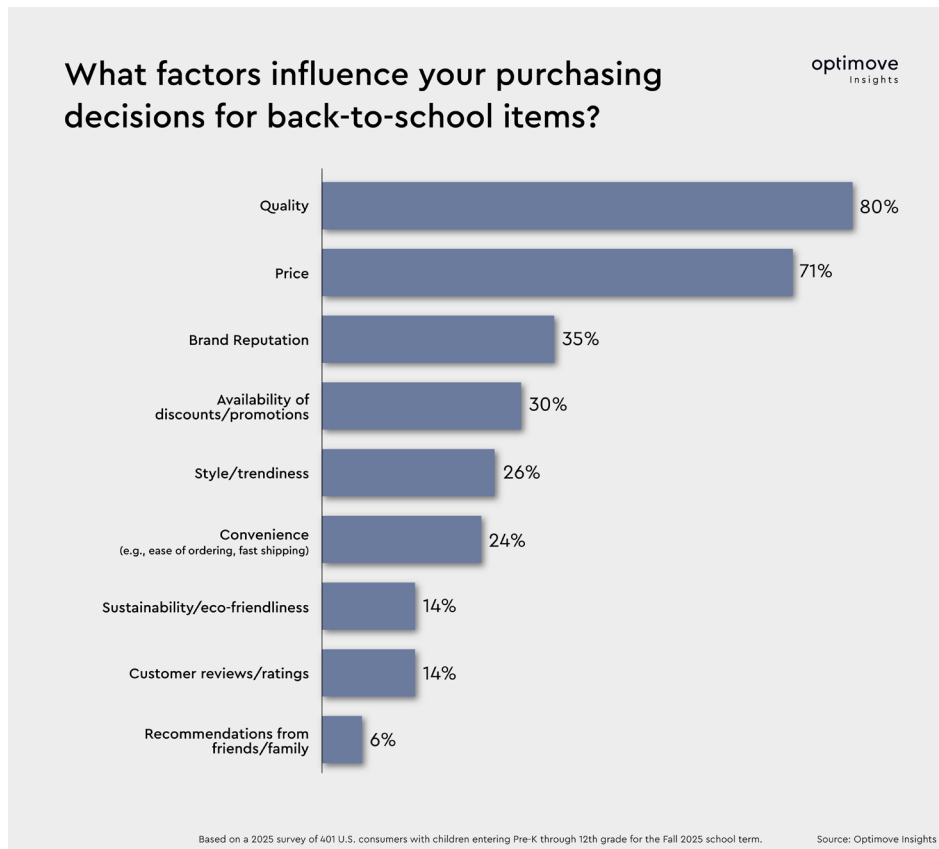
- **Cost of everyday essentials:** Forty-nine percent (49%) say their greatest pricing worry is groceries and daily essentials, underscoring how tariffs ripple into broader spending restraint.



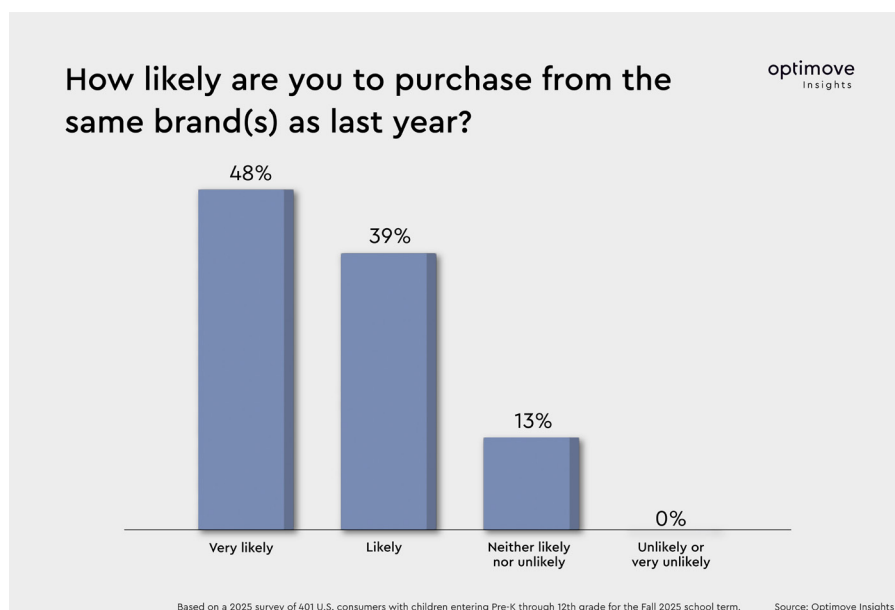
Retail takeaway: Retailers should proactively communicate how they're helping customers mitigate cost increases or provide tariff-free alternatives. Position your brand as a partner, not just a vendor.

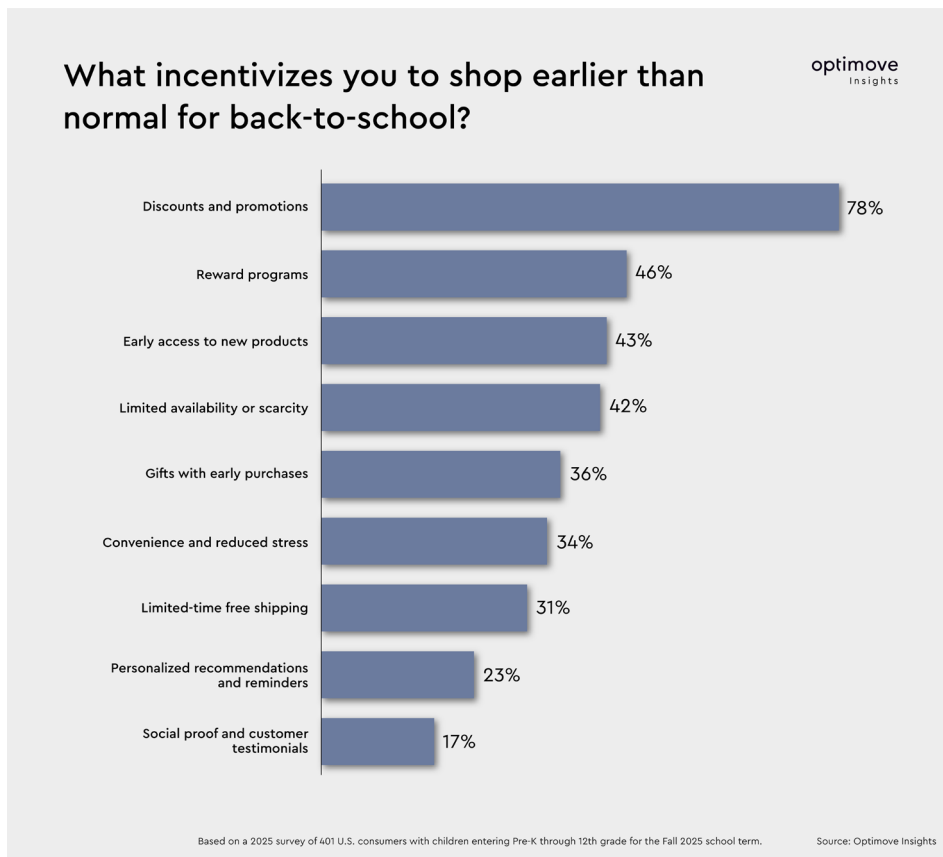
3. Consumers Still Prioritize Quality But Are Swayed by Price

- 80% say quality is the most important purchase factor, followed by 71% who say price.



- Brand loyalty is high, with 87% at least likely to purchase from the same brand, but 78% say promotions could influence their loyalty.

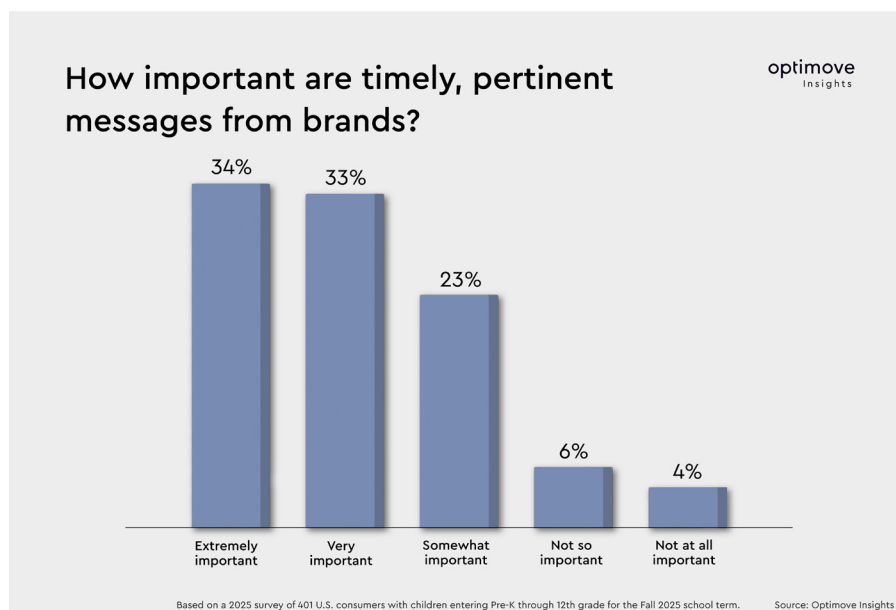


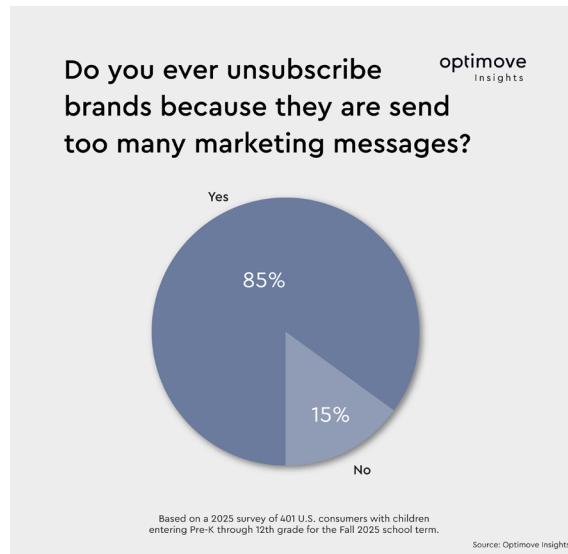


Retail takeaway: Loyalty is up for grabs. While shoppers lean on trusted brands, price sensitivity makes them open to switching. Strong omnichannel messaging and well-timed discounts are crucial.

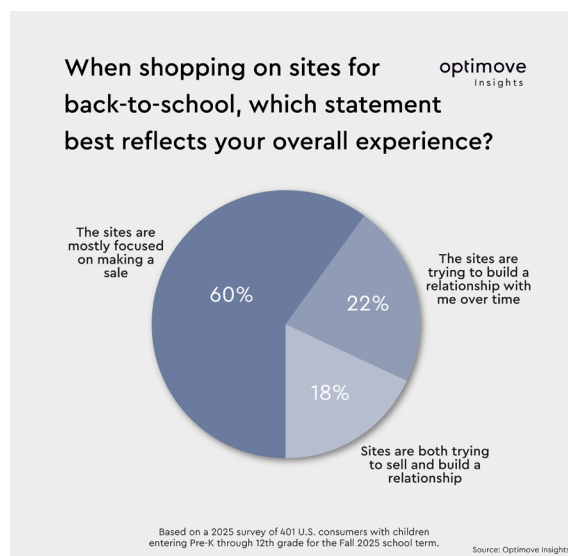
4. Empathy = Personalization + Respect for Boundaries

- 67% value timely and pertinent brand messages, but 85% unsubscribe when overwhelmed by marketing, suffering from Marketing Fatigue.





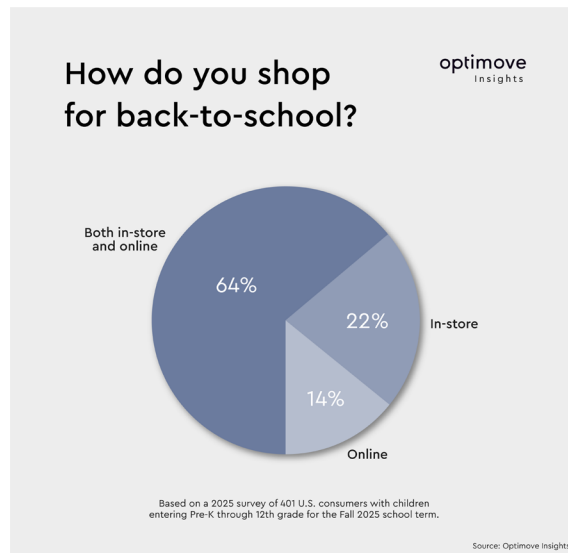
- Just 22% feel brands are trying to build relationships, while 60% believe brands are just trying to close a sale.



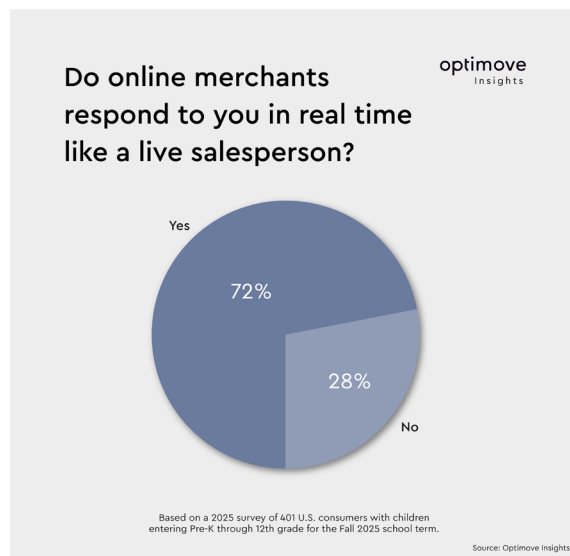
Retail takeaway: Retailers must balance frequency and relevance. Personalization isn't just about data, it's about empathy. Messaging should feel helpful, not transactional.

5. Omnichannel Is a Must, But Trust Is Fragile

- 64% of back-to-school shoppers split their purchases between online and in-store.



- 55% say they are in control of their personal information, and 72% expect real-time, personalized interactions from online merchants.



Retail takeaway: Winning brands will deliver seamless omnichannel experiences without compromising consumer trust. Transparency about data use and responsiveness in real time are key differentiators.

Recommendations for Retailers

1. Lead with Empathy

Ensure all communications reflect understanding of economic stress. Use supportive, reassuring messaging instead of aggressive sales tactics. Address concerns like inflation and tariffs transparently, offering early-bird pricing or alternative options when possible.

2. Emphasize Value

Highlight cost-saving opportunities through bundles, loyalty programs, and back-to-school promotions that emphasize long-term value. Promote products that are durable, reusable, or sustainable, appealing to both cost-conscious and values-driven shoppers.

3. Support Budget Flexibility

Offer payment options like buy-now-pay-later, layaway, or installment plans to help families better manage large seasonal expenses.

4. Enhance Personalization Through AI

Use customer data to create relevant, timely product recommendations, messaging, and offers. Deliver personalization that feels human and meaningful—reflecting customer needs, not just transactional goals.

5. Be Positionless in Execution

Empower marketing teams with Positionless Marketing. By removing internal bottlenecks and enabling marketers to independently execute personalized campaigns, brands can respond faster to changing customer needs. This agility helps ensure messages are empathetic, timely, and relevant—especially critical in a sensitive shopping season.

6. Strengthen Hybrid Shopping Options

Blend digital and physical shopping experiences with smooth curbside pickup, seamless returns, real-time inventory updates, and in-store flexibility.

7. Offer Planning Support

Help parents shop more efficiently with content like budget planners, checklists, and expert tips. Include user-generated content, reviews, and testimonials to build trust and guide decisions.

Conclusion:

Back-to-school 2025 is more than a seasonal shopping moment, it is a litmus test for how well retailers can respond to consumer uncertainty with empathy, speed, and precision. As families navigate inflation, tariff concerns, and tighter budgets, they are looking for more than deals. They are seeking brands that understand their challenges, respect their boundaries, and deliver personalized value.

Retailers who embrace Positionless Marketing will be best equipped to meet this moment. By eliminating silos and empowering every marketer to act quickly and empathetically, Positionless Marketing enables brands to become trusted partners—not just sellers. With the aid of AI, retailers can personalize at scale, respond in real time, and create marketing that feels genuinely helpful rather than transactional.

In a year defined by financial sensitivity and emotional complexity, success will belong to the retailers who lead with empathy, deliver with agility, and never lose sight of the human side of commerce. Positionless Marketing is not only a solution—it's a necessity for building lasting customer trust and loyalty in the back-to-school season and beyond.

About Optimove

Optimove, the creator of Positionless Marketing, frees marketing teams from the limitations of fixed roles, giving every marketer the power to execute any marketing task instantly and independently. Positionless Marketing has been proven to improve campaign efficiency by 88%, allowing marketing teams to create more personalized engagement with existing customers.

Optimove is recognized as the Visionary Leader in Gartner's Magic Quadrant for Multichannel Marketing Hubs. Being a visionary leader is a hallmark of Optimove. It was the first CRM Marketing Platform to natively embed AI with the ability to predict customer migrations between lifecycle stages in 2012.

Today, its comprehensive AI-powered suite is at the leading edge of empowering marketers to optimize workflows from Insight to Creation and through Orchestration. Optimove provides industry-specific and use-case solutions for leading consumer brands globally.

For more information, go to [Optimove.com](https://www.optimove.com)

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