

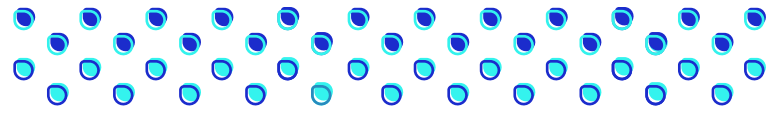


EBOOK

# The Missing Link in Back-to-School Marketing

Back-to-school spending will hit \$128B, but most marketers are targeting devices, not the households making the decisions. Here's how to change that.

**PEBBLEPOST**



# Back-to-School Shopping Isn't a Single Buyer Journey

Back-to-school is one of the biggest retail seasons of the year, with spending expected to reach [\\$128 billion](#).

But for retail marketers, scale is only part of the challenge. The bigger issue is that back-to-school shopping doesn't happen all at once, and purchase decisions rarely involve just one person.

At PebblePost, we work with retail marketers navigating this season every year, and consistently see the same issue emerge:

**The shopping behavior isn't fragmented.  
The identity infrastructure is.**

Back-to-school spend  
expected to reach

**\$128B**

Source: National Retail Federation



# How the Back-to-School Shopping Timeline Actually Unfolds

Back-to-school shopping unfolds over months, not moments. Intent builds gradually as households move from discovery to comparison to purchase.

## ● JUNE

### **Exploration Begins**

Shoppers start researching early. Parents browse products, compare retailers, and begin evaluating price ranges.

## ● JULY & AUGUST

### **Comparison and Consideration Peak**

Households move deeper into the decision process. Shoppers revisit products across devices, compare prices, wait for promotions, and narrow down final purchase decisions.

## ● SEPTEMBER

### **Urgency Takes Over**

Forgotten items suddenly become essential. Last-minute purchases accelerate as the school year begins and remaining needs become more immediate.

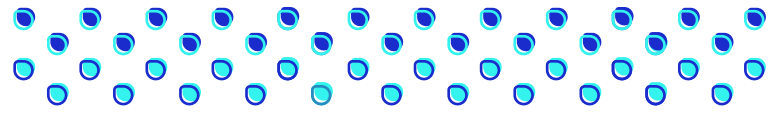


Throughout this process, intent appears, disappears, and resurfaces across multiple people and devices within the same home.

From a device-level perspective, this behavior looks fragmented.

**From a household perspective, it's one continuous decision journey unfolding over time.**





# Why Device-Level Targeting Fails During Back-to-School Season

Most marketing systems weren't designed for long, multi-person buying cycles like back-to-school.

Instead, they rely on device-based identity (cookies, mobile IDs, and probabilistic graphs) to track and reach users. But those signals struggle to keep up with how households actually shop.

They decay before the purchase happens. They multiply across devices. And when stitched together probabilistically, they often connect the wrong signals entirely.

The result is wasted spend, inconsistent targeting, and fragmented measurement.

Marketers end up optimizing toward a version of the customer that doesn't reflect how the decision is actually being made.



## DEVICE-LEVEL CHALLENGES

Identity signals decay over time

Devices multiply within households

Frequency becomes imbalanced

Attribution is fragmented

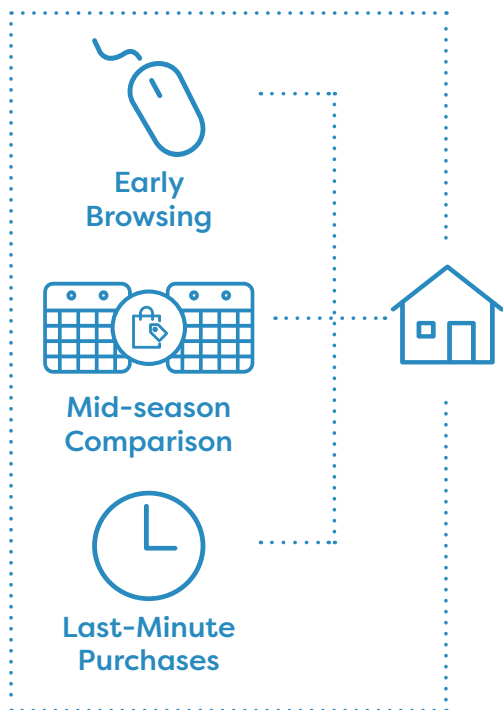
Probabilistic matching introduces inaccuracies



# Household Identity Reflects How Purchasing Decisions Actually Happen

Back-to-school decisions often happen within a household, not on a single device.

A household-based identity approach connects people and devices into one unified view of the buying unit, creating continuity across the entire shopping journey.



That shift changes everything.

Activity that once appeared disconnected becomes part of the same story. Early browsing, mid-season comparison, and last-minute purchases all tie back to the same household.

Unlike device-based identifiers, household identity persists over time. It doesn't reset when cookies expire or when devices change.

Instead of chasing fragmented signals, marketers gain a clearer understanding of purchase intent and household behavior.

## WHAT MAKES HOUSEHOLD IDENTITY DIFFERENT?

### Persistent Identity

Maintains continuity across the full shopping window

### Unified Household View

Connects multiple people and devices into one buying unit

### Stable Signal Foundation

Anchored to real purchase behavior rather than probabilistic assumptions

# The Foundation Is **Transaction Data**

The strength of household identity depends on the quality of the underlying signals.

Transaction data links real people to real households because it's based on verified purchase behavior, not modeled assumptions.

When identity is tied to what households actually buy, it becomes more stable across the full buying journey.

That matters during the back-to-school season, when purchase intent develops gradually over multiple months and channels.

Transaction data helps marketers understand where households actually are in their buying journey, not just where they've recently browsed.

## WHY IT MATTERS



Daily transaction signal refreshes



Cross-brand purchase visibility



Accurate household matching



More durable identity resolution



Improved audience relevance





# Better Identity Improves Everything Downstream

When identity aligns with how purchase decisions are actually made, every stage of marketing performance becomes more effective.

## TARGETING

Targeting becomes more precise because marketers are reaching real households rather than inferred users. Transaction data adds additional context by revealing where a household is in its buying journey, not just where it has recently browsed.

## FREQUENCY

Frequency becomes more balanced across devices within the same home, reducing wasted impressions and avoiding the overexposure that often happens with device-level targeting.

## ATTRIBUTION

Measurement becomes clearer because marketers can connect exposure to outcomes at the household level, where purchasing decisions actually occur.

**In a compressed, highly competitive retail season like back-to-school, identity clarity becomes a competitive advantage.**



# Household Identity Creates Stronger Cross-Channel Performance

Some marketing channels already align naturally to the household.

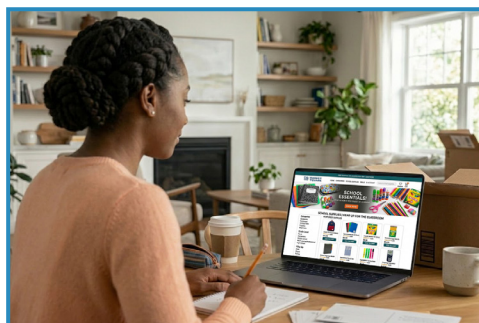
Connected TV reaches viewers through shared household screens. Direct mail reaches the home itself. Neither depends on fragile device identifiers.

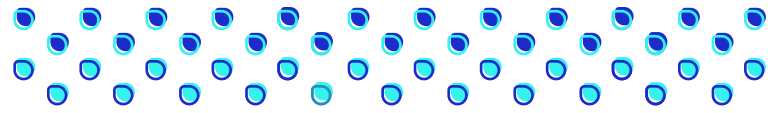
When these channels operate through a shared household identity framework, they reinforce each other.

CTV builds awareness across the household. Direct mail creates a tangible, high-impact touchpoint. Digital channels then capture demand regardless of which device the final purchase happens on.

Without shared identity, these interactions remain disconnected.

With it, they become a coordinated marketing system.





# How PebblePost Powers Back-to-School Campaigns

PebblePost is built around household identity tied to real cross-brand transaction data.

That foundation connects targeting, optimization, and measurement from start to finish, reducing the signal loss that often undermines device-based approaches.

## THE PEBBLEPOST APPROACH



### Transaction Data

Verified purchase behavior creates stable identity signals



### Household Identity

People and devices connect into a unified household view



### Smarter Targeting

Campaigns align to actual buying behavior and purchase intent



### Ongoing Optimization

Audience performance improves throughout the season



### Closed-Loop Measurement

Exposure connects directly to household outcomes

# The Impact of Household-Level Marketing

Across back-to-school campaigns, household identity creates stronger alignment between targeting, timing, and measurement.



## 10% AOV Growth from July to August

Average order values increased as household purchase intent intensified throughout the 2025 back-to-school season.



## 60% Conversion Rate Lift in August

Back-to-school lookalike campaigns saw conversion rates surge during peak purchase periods as models optimized against real transaction behavior.



## 21% Higher AOV for Apparel & Accessories Brands





Fashion retailers experienced some of the strongest seasonal gains as households shifted from browsing to high-intent purchasing closer to the school year.

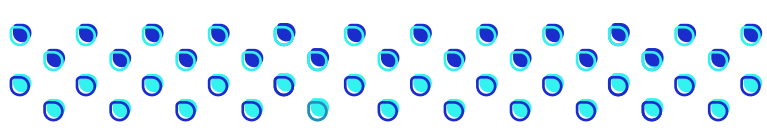
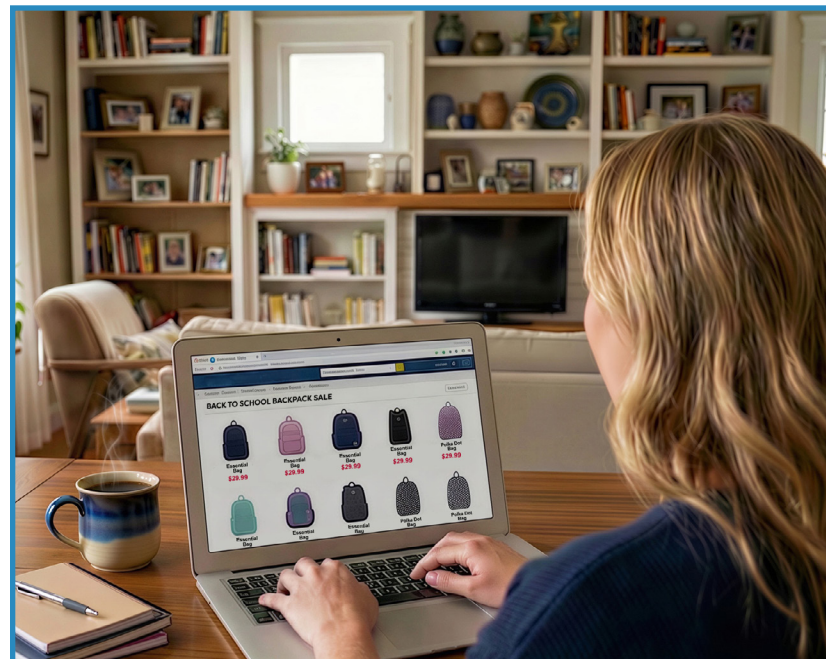


# What Winning Brands Understand About **Back-to-School Marketing**

The brands that win during back-to-school season are the ones that understand who's actually making the purchasing decision and build their targeting around a consistent view of the household from first browse to final purchase.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

-  Back-to-school shopping is household-driven
-  Intent moves across people, devices, and channels
-  Device-based identity struggles during long buying cycles
-  Transaction data creates more durable identity





## Prepare Before Peak Season Hits

Don't wait until peak season to fix broken targeting and fragmented measurement.

Reach out today to build a back-to-school strategy rooted in household identity and real purchase behavior.

**Already a PebblePost brand partner?** Connect with your Brand Partnerships team to get started.

**PEBBLEPOST**