

Why back-to-school marketing should include mobile

By [Jordan Crook](#)

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Teens love mobile phones

Retail giant Kmart's new multichannel back-to-school campaign is lacking one aspect: mobile. Why wouldn't the superstore communicate with its customers in the way that they talk to one another?

With September around the corner, back-to-school campaigns are launching left and right, and most include some sort of mobile component, especially when trying to reach the youth demographic. However, Kmart's "Be a Schoolebrity" campaign failed to incorporate mobile, despite the fact that the channel offers a one-to-one communication with tweens and teens.

"Mobile absolutely needs to be an element of any back-to-school campaign, particularly any one that reaches tweens," said Eric Harber, president and chief operating officer at [HipCricket](#), Kirkland, WA.

"Parents may be the ones making the actual purchases but in most cases tweens are making purchasing decisions or strongly influencing them, and the medium these tweens rely on more than any other is mobile," he said.

[Kmart](#)'s back-to-school campaign includes its Be a Schoolebrity Sweepstakes and a new Layaway option, where parents can buy clothes, pay for them over an extended period of time and pick them up just in time for the school bell to ring.



Kmart's Schoolebrity Web site

The sweepstakes can be entered through mail-in entry forms that can be found in-store and via [Kmart's Web site](#).

Winners have the chance to get a visit from a [Nickelodeon](#) star at their school for one lucky day.

"There are two reasons that mobile should be a part of any back-to-school campaign," said Maya Mikhailov, vice president at [Slifter](#), New York.

"First because kids are the influencers and they are overwhelmingly on their phones," she said. "Second, moms are busy and on the go so connecting with their mobile phone is the best way to ensure purchase consideration."

According to a [Harris Interactive](#) study, second to clothing, teens say a mobile phone tells the most about a person's social status or popularity, outranking jewelry, watches and shoes. The study also found that mobile phones are fast becoming a social necessity among teens. In fact, a majority (57 percent) view their handsets as the key to their social life.

Nearly four out of five teens, or 17 million, carry a mobile phone, which is a 40 percent increase from 2004. A whopping 57 percent of teens credit mobility for improving their quality of life.

Eighty percent of the respondents said that the mobile phone offered a sense of security while on the go. This was further confirmed when 79 percent said they used the phone when needing a ride, 51 percent to get information and 35 percent to just help someone in trouble.

“Mobile is the preferred communications medium for school-age children and young adults, so it is of course relevant to back-to-school campaigns,” said Thomas Emmons, team leader of mobile/innovation for [Sears Holdings Corp.](#), Hoffman Estates, IL.

“That said, it is much more important to focus on where mobile can add or create value, than in making sure it is part of every back-to-school campaign,” he said.

In July, Mr. Emmons spoke at the Mobile Commerce Spotlight conference, hosted by [this publication](#) and the [Direct Marketing Association](#), leading the audience through Sears’ more-than-impressive mobile strategy.

He spoke on the usual pit-falls that mobile marketers often run into, and explained how he would’ve done things differently the first time around.

Most big brands aren’t comfortable with revealing their marketing strategies, but Mr. Emmons and Sears, the parent company for Kmart, both shared their mishaps and prosperity in an effort to help grow the mobile marketing industry, becoming industry leaders.

So why is mobile absent from Kmart’s campaign?

“Today’s tween demographic is more mobile than ever,” said Dave Wachs, president at [Cellit](#), Chicago, IL. “According to [Luth Research](#), over 93 percent of all text messages sent to this demographic are read.

“As tweens are in school, the only medium for ongoing direct communication, any time, any place is mobile,” he said.

Also in July, [JCPenney](#) ran a multichannel back-to-school campaign that involved mobile, in the simple form of SMS or, as some might say, native tween language.

Teenagers could sign up for text alerts at <http://www.jcp.com/teen>, a site that was also optimized for smartphones ([see story](#)).

“Mobile is a crucial part of any multichannel, back-to-school campaign because it affords the brand marketers and their agencies the ability to establish an ongoing dialogue with consumers who may have timely interests now, like back-to-school, yet will eventually be moving on to other things once back-to-school morphs to holiday shopping,” said Jay Kolbe, vice president at [Weber Shandwick Worldwide](#), New York.

“This way, marketers can engage and move along with consumers from event to event, as their interests and needs change,” he said.