

# School Rules

Retailers and vendors offer ways to boost uniform sales.  
By Melissa Knific



Classroom  
School  
Uniforms

**UNIFORMS SALES ARE** in full swing for 2010, as July, August and September mark the top-performing months for the category. “We look forward to this time of year,” said Maxine Geiser, owner of Mobile, Ala.-based Weber’s Department Store. “This is our Christmas.” But that doesn’t mean retailers should assume the merchandise will fly off the shelves. With some extra effort, stores that sell uniforms can boost their sales and earn some extra cash.

First off, retailers carrying school uniforms need to recognize it is a true destination purchase, noted Michael Arking, vice president of the school uniform division of New York City-based French Toast. Because the customers are searching for something specific—as dictated by their child’s school—they can’t be as flexible about what they’re buying. Plus, the need is immediate. “If [shoppers] walk in a store and the size isn’t there, they have to go to a competitor,” Arking said. “You’ve got to have it—and you can’t even have it in the back of the store.” Here, Arking and others share additional tips for school uniform success.

## 1. MAKE UNIFORMS VISIBLE

Linda Albright, manager of Serendipity Uniforms in Montgomery, Ala., makes sure school uniforms are as visible as possible during the peak uniform buying season, putting the merchandise near the front counter. David Eichelbaum, co-owner of Savannah Kids wear,



French Toast

based in Savannah, Ga., has a different approach: He keeps the uniforms in the same place all the time. “It’s about consistency,” he explained, noting that customers know exactly where to find them. Eichelbaum does, however, place a few key items—products that locals are unlikely to find at competitive stores—toward the front to entice them to the back of the store for more.

Also in terms of visibility, retailers note outside signage is important to draw in customers. Unless the store is specifically a uniform operation, potential customers might pass it unless they see some kind of indication that standardized school wear can be found inside. “For three months, our entire front window features uniforms for every school in the area,” said Bobby Mirchandani, owner of Soul Train Fashions, which has two shops in the New Orleans area. Serendipity Uniforms takes it one step further by alerting area schools that they have the appropriate uniforms available and sending notices to residences.

## 2. REASSESS YOUR ASSORTMENT

While visibility is key, actually having the product in stock is the determiner. “You have

to have depth of inventory so there’s a selection on hand when the parents arrive in the store,” declared Andy Beattie, senior vice president of Chatsworth, Calif.-based Strategic Partners, which manufactures Classroom School Uniforms. He also noted that maintaining a focused collection is key:



The Old School Brand

It’s a rule the manufacturer itself adopted this year when reexamining how it could do better business. “We’re narrowing to key bodies,” he explained. “Depth of inventory is more important than a wide assortment of items.”

Eichelbaum also noted that some retailers fall short when it

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comes to their size range. Many stop their run at girls' 16 and boys' 20, when a number of the students require adult sizes.

### 3. MAKE A YEAR-ROUND COMMITMENT

Retailers and manufacturers alike said it's advantageous to carry school uniforms throughout the year. For one, it gives mom-and-pops an upper hand over the big-boxes. "A lot of big retailers, like Walmart, don't do it," Albright said. Keeping uniforms in stock after September is wise because kids' grow and no matter how durable the apparel, there's always the chance an item will need to be replaced. In addition, Albright stressed that kids will need cooler-weather items, such as cardigans and jackets, come winter. Mirchandani raised another point: "Many parents cannot afford to buy all the uniforms [they need] at the start of the year," he said, noting that they may decide to slowly add pieces to their child's closet as the year goes on.

### 4. HELP CUSTOMERS MAXIMIZE THEIR BUDGETS

On a similar note, parents are looking for ways to stretch their budget, so the word "value" is ever present in the uniform world. "It's extremely important that the customers get good value," Mirchandani noted. "Especially in school uniforms—they're always looking for a bargain." At Soul Train Fashion, he offers a package deal of five embroidered

## Uniform Hot List

A look at the fashion updates vendors are offering for next year.

- Low-rise pants and shorts
- Built-in extras like belts on skirts and ribbons on sleeves
  - Purple
- Fitted blouses for girls
- Brighter colors, as opposed to traditional white, gray and navy
  - Cell phone pockets
- Longer shorts length for boys
- Accessories, especially knee-high socks

shirts and five bottoms (pants, skirts or jumpers) for \$119.99. But value isn't only about price; it's also about quality and growth features like adjustable waistbands and generous inseams. "A well-made garment is expected to last the entire school year and grow with the child," noted Ron Johnson, president of Monrovia, Calif.-based Wyndam Brands Apparel, maker of The Old School Brand.

### 5. DON'T FORGET THE EXTRAS

While there may be a limit to the number of uniforms parents will purchase, kids' entreaties for accessories often help pry their wallets open a bit further. Arking suggests retailers stock up on items like socks, belts, hair bows, backpacks—even jewelry. "There's a lot more accessorizing [among uniform wearers]," he observed. And the extras add up. "Every dollar counts," said Mirchandani, who has worked to make Soul Train Fashion a one-stop shop. The store has a separate shoe section that's proven successful for the school uniform crowd.

Fortunately, the outlook on school uniforms sales is good. French Toast's estimates show the number of uniforms worn nationwide is increasing by 3 to 5 percent per year—or an additional 12 million children annually. According to Beattie, Target and Walmart are already showing comp gains on day-to-day sales from last year. "[The school uniform category] was not as affected by some of the economic drivers that we've seen," he noted. "We're confident our season is going to be good." •

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