

Back-to-school buying patterns are changing

Rather than participating in a mad rush during the traditional back-to-school period in January every year, parents are increasingly opting to buy their children's school wear all year round.

They're looking to spread the costs of buying uniforms throughout the year rather than shopping for it all at once and they are buying, therefore, from retailers that stock a comprehensive range of school wear all the time. Patterns also show that some customers might buy fewer items, such as shirts, but they look for quality when doing so. They want tougher clothes, stain resistance features, better quality fabric, bigger hems that allow for alterations and anything that adds value and prolongs the life of the school wear they buy.

PEP, which claims over 50% of the South African school wear market, says this is because the pressures on household budgets are increasing. People have now to pay around 25% more on their food and the strain on disposable income has forced them to think differently about how and when they spend their money.

This year, the retailer has kept price increases to the bare minimum and well below inflation. "We can do this", explains PEP's merchandise director, Sean Cardinaal, "because of the large volumes we buy and because we try to pass on every saving we make to our customers."

"As quality is a big issue for customers nowadays people should be on the lookout for misleading leather claims when buying school shoes", warns Cardinaal. "Some retailers have been known to imply that a leather compound shoe is real leather when it is not. The best way to guard against this is to buy from a retailer with tried and tested quality"

The retailer has always stocked Toughhees leather shoes and this year it has also introduced an exclusive range of Toughhees clothing, which is Teflon-coated - and which will be sold in selected stores. The range includes grey long trousers and white shirts and the Teflon coating enables stain release and promotes durability of the garments.

The Toughhees range will, together with the Student Prince and standard range of school clothing give customers a comprehensive range of school wear to suit all pockets.

Core competence training

Next year, the retailer will open two more Student Prince Academies, one in Berea and one in Soweto in addition to its existing four academies (two in the Western Cape and two in Gauteng). This means that almost 1000 Grade 4 children will receive after-school core competence training in literacy, numeracy and life skills three times a week. The children are also being kept at school and off the street, given a meal and are in a safe environment while receiving this supplementary education. The Student Prince Academies initiative has been fully endorsed by the Department of Education.

PEP MD, George Steyn says: "Although it's a multi-million rand project, it is still a small start for us. While we're awaiting official results for the first year of the scheme, the signs are very promising - the academies are working well. If we see marked improvement in the children's skills, we will expand this initiative further in the future".

Standard uniforms

The retailer says it has always advocated the adoption of a standard school uniform by government schools in order to reduce the costs of uniforms for parents. This culminated two years ago in a project with the Department of Education whereby the retailer helped distribute the government's *National Guidelines on School Uniforms* throughout its store network in order to reach as many parents as possible.

The most common school wear items in South Africa are grey trousers and white shirts. PEP believes this should be adopted as the standard school uniform and their position on school uniforms is:

- Standardise school uniforms based on the most common items used currently
- Do not compromise quality
- Use economies of scale to bring costs and therefore prices down.

Parents face the burden of school uniforms expenses every year. If, for any reason, their children move schools, this burden increases - unless standard school uniform items are accepted at both schools.

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