

Online retailers are also banking on solid results.

Karmaloop.com founder and CEO Greg Selkoe reported that sales for his firm are already up 70 percent from last year, and the e-tailor is looking for more gains in the coming months. "We're expecting back-to-school to be really strong," he said.

However, the continued growth of e-commerce and flash sale sites is causing anxiety for many independents.

"Our customer is more tech-savvy than ever," said David Fenwick, owner of Fenwick's Footwear in Austin, Texas. "They are more aware of deal websites and they come in with their smartphones and compare prices while they're in the store."

He added that if sales don't start to pick up, he will put promotion plans into effect earlier than in years past.

In Englewood, N.J., Little Steps owner Denny Cassel is offering price matching to consumers who find products cheaper online. In addition, he has partnered with local businesses on discounts for customers referred by other stores in the area.

"We're just holding our ground. We're not breaking any [sales] records right now," he said. Still, he's hopeful that the b-t-s season will spark buying.

"We think our customers are going to be awakened after a long bad streak in the economy and realize that the quality and prices we offer are reasonable," Cassel said.

Daniel Kahalani, president of DNA Footwear, which has brick-and-mortar stores in Brooklyn, N.Y., as well as an e-commerce site, said sales promotions are an effective way to drive business in this economic climate. During the b-t-s shopping season, DNA will run a "buy one, get the second pair half off" sale for consumers.

"Customers are looking for bargains, and they're getting smarter and smarter about finding [deals] these days," Kahalani said. "We're e-commerce, and it's a very aggressive way to sell items."

The retailer's marketing tactics will include social media such as Facebook, Twitter and the DNA Footwear blog.

Research company NPD Group's 2011 back-to-school study noted "value" was the top motivator for consumers' shopping for the fall.

"The consumer is willing to pay a little bit more for the product," said NPD chief industry analyst Marshal Cohen. "They're looking for brands with a reputation and stores that have a little better service."