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2026 Spring Peak-Season Returns Benchmark Report

What Current Industry Data Tells Us About the Importance of a Retail Returns Prevention Strategy

Executive Summary

This complimentary analysis by Returnalyze examines year-over-year changes in product return rates and the adoption of size- and color-bracketing behaviors across key apparel and footwear categories for the 2025 and 2026 Spring Peak Season periods. It defines how the Spring shopping season behaves across four distinct monthly windows, analyzes return-rate performance by category, and identifies targeted interventions to address preventable returns.

2026 Spring Peak-Season Dynamics

Market Context
The Spring retail calendar has become one of the most consequential and complex stretches of the year. Where the Q4 holiday season is anchored to a single promotional event, the Spring Peak Season unfolds gradually across February through May, shaped by wardrobe transition, Easter and Mother's Day gifting, prom and wedding season, and the shift into warm-weather assortments.

Elevated Exploratory Buying
Shoppers moving out of cold-weather categories and into transitional and warm-weather apparel face more fit and color uncertainty, driving higher rates of bracketing as they order multiple sizes or colors to compare in hand. In some categories such as menswear, bracketing can be profitable, boosting conversion and confidence in consistent-fit, high-margin categories. The opportunity for retailers is understanding where bracketing supports the business and where it erodes margin.

Increased Margin Pressure
According to National Retail Federation research, returns remain one of the largest cost centers in retail, with apparel and footwear consistently among the most-affected categories.

That pressure is amplified during any high-volume shopping window, Spring included, when promotional depth and accelerated buying cycles compress the time retailers have to catch product-level issues before they scale.

Longer, More Gradual Peak
Unlike Q4, where return rates typically peak in the weeks before Black Friday and decline steadily afterward, Spring behaves more like a slow build and release. Multiple demand drivers — Valentine's Day and early-spring refresh in February, Spring break in March, Easter in April, and Mother's Day in May — mean the season's highest return-rate pressure can land mid-season rather than at the open or close of the window.

Limited Retail Analytics
Traditional retail analytics, often limited to category-level reporting or lagging indicators, are ill-equipped to detect the product-level issues that drive return spikes, such as inconsistent sizing, problematic materials, or misleading product-detail page content. AI-trained models and diagnostics can identify these patterns earlier, isolate high-risk attributes, and surface preventable return drivers quickly before they scale.

The following report provides a detailed analysis of return-rate performance and size- and color-bracketing behavior across key categories during the 2025 and 2026 Spring Peak Seasons, offering benchmarks and insights to guide strategic decision-making for subsequent peak seasons.

Methodology

Data used in this report represents online purchases for a defined segment of fashion, apparel, and footwear retailers in the U.S. with active returns-prevention strategies. Benchmarks for each subcategory were calculated using a consistent price band across these retailers.

Proprietary AI algorithms were used to categorize millions of transactions and returns from multiple retail systems and sources. Because the Spring Peak Season is not anchored to a single promotional event the way the Q4 holiday season is anchored to Black Friday, results are segmented into four monthly windows spanning the 2025 and 2026 Spring Peak Seasons as follows:

Time Period	2025 Dates	2026 Dates
Feburary	Feb. 1 - 28, 2025	Feb. 1 - 28, 2026
March	Mar. 1 - 31, 2025	Mar. 1 - 31, 2026
April	Apr. 1 - 30, 2025	Apr. 1 - 30, 2026
May	May 1 - 31, 2025	May 1 - 31, 2026

For this analysis, size bracketing is defined as buying two or more sizes of the same item/style on the same day. Color bracketing — tracked for the first time alongside size behavior in this report — is defined as buying two or more colors of the same item/style on the same day.

The number of contributing retailers per category ranged from five to eight and, in a few categories, narrowed slightly over the course of the season (for example, All Categories moved from eight retailers in February to seven from March onward). This should be considered when comparing month-to-month magnitude within a single category.

Key Findings

Across all categories and months, return rates shifted by an average of roughly +0.1 percentage points year-over-year, nearly identical to the flat aggregate movement Returnalyze observed in the 2025 Holiday Peak Season. As in that report, this headline stability conceals meaningful divergence beneath it: Men's and Women's categories moved in largely opposite directions for most of the Spring Season.

Men's Categories Climbed, Then Reversed Sharply
Men's Clothing and Shoes both saw return rates increase year-over-year in February, March, and April. Men's Shoes increased by as much as +2.2 points in April before reversing sharply in May, when both categories improved by roughly a full point. This is the sharpest inflection point in the dataset, driven by changes in the May assortment, promotional cadence, sizing guidance or other Returnalyze-driven adjustments for men's product.

Women's Categories Trended Toward Improvement
Women's Clothing return rates declined (improved) in all four months, with the steepest year-over-year gain in May. Women's Shoes told a more volatile story: a strong March improvement (-2.0 points) gave way to a May increase (+0.8 points), suggesting late-season fit or assortment issues specific to footwear.

Mid-Season Peak, Not a Single Event Spike
Unlike the Q4-2025 holiday season, where return rates peak in the weeks before Black Friday and decline steadily afterward, Spring 2026 shows a broader mid-season crest. Current-year return rates for All Categories, Men's Shoes, and Women's Clothing all rise to their highest point in April before easing in May, consistent with a gradual build tied to Spring break, Easter, and wardrobe-transition shopping rather than one promotional event.

Color Bracketing Is a Bigger Factor Than Size Bracketing in Men's Clothing
Men's Clothing shows a striking pattern: color bracketing (11.6%-13.4% of units) runs roughly

double that of Size bracketing (6.2%-7.2%) throughout the season. As stated this can translate to higher AOV for retailers, and not necessarily higher returns as consumers find consistent fit. Women's Clothing and both Shoes categories kept size and color bracketing within a few points of each other.

Footwear Bracketing Was the Most Volatile
Size-bracketing swings were largest in the two Shoes categories: Men's Shoes ranged from +1.4 points (February) to -1.2 points (May), and Women's Shoes swung from +0.6 points (February) to -1.5 points (May). Clothing categories, by contrast, moved by half a point or less in most months. This echoes a finding from Returnalyze's 2025 Holiday Peak Season report: footwear returns are especially sensitive to attribute-specific issues such as fit and construction.

Summary
Together, these findings paint a picture consistent with the 2025 Holiday report: aggregate return rates appear stable year-over-year, but the underlying drivers are highly dynamic and diverge sharply by gender-of-category and by month. Spring's gradual, multi-driver build creates several distinct windows, rather than one, in which retailers can intervene, with the clearest opportunities in men's product sizing and promotional cadence, and fit support for footwear.

Peak-Season Benchmarks

Consolidated Year-over-Year Return Rates and Bracketing Behavior by Peak-Season Period
The following data is summarized from the aggregated 2025/2026 Spring Peak-Season performance of fashion, apparel, and footwear retailers with investments in returns prevention.

February 2025 vs February 2026

Category	2025 Rate	2026 Rate	YoY Change	2025 Size% Bracketing	2026 Size% Bracketing	2025 Color% Bracketing	2026 Color% Bracketing
All Categories	31.9%	31.8%	-0.1%	6.4%	6.5%	6.9%	6.6%
Men’s Clothing	24.3%	25.6%	+1.3%	6.2%	6.2%	11.6%	12.0%
Men’s Shoes	24.7%	26.2%	+1.4%	3.3%	4.7%	2.6%	2.3%
Women’s Clothing	38.5%	37.5%	-1.0%	8.2%	7.8%	6.9%	6.4%
Women’s Shoes	28.7%	28.1%	-0.6%	3.8%	4.5%	3.9%	3.1%

March 2025 vs March 2026

Category	2025 Rate	2026 Rate	YoY Change	2025 Size% Bracketing	2026 Size% Bracketing	2025 Color% Bracketing	2026 Color% Bracketing
All Categories	33.8%	33.7%	-0.1%	6.8%	6.8%	7.6%	7.4%
Men’s Clothing	25.6%	27.4%	+1.8%	6.5%	7.2%	12.7%	13.4%
Men’s Shoes	26.6%	28.6%	+2.0%	5.9%	4.9%	4.0%	4.2%
Women’s Clothing	39.6%	38.6%	-1.0%	8.1%	8.0%	7.9%	6.9%
Women’s Shoes	34.1%	32.1%	-2.0%	3.8%	3.9%	2.8%	3.5%

April 2025 vs. April 2026

Category	2025 Rate	2026 Rate	YoY Change	2025 Size% Bracketing	2026 Size% Bracketing	2025 Color% Bracketing	2026 Color% Bracketing
All Categories	33.7%	34.0%	+0.3%	7.0%	6.8%	7.6%	7.5%
Men’s Clothing	25.8%	27.2%	+1.4%	6.9%	6.6%	13.0%	12.6%
Men’s Shoes	27.4%	29.7%	+2.2%	5.8%	4.9%	2.7%	4.2%
Women’s Clothing	39.3%	38.8%	-0.5%	8.3%	8.3%	7.6%	7.2%
Women’s Shoes	32.8%	32.2%	-0.6%	3.9%	4.1%	3.5%	4.1%

May 2025 vs. May 2026

Category	2025 Rate	2026 Rate	YoY Change	2025 Size% Bracketing	2026 Size% Bracketing	2025 Color% Bracketing	2026 Color% Bracketing
All Categories	33.8%	32.7%	-1.2%	6.9%	6.6%	7.2%	6.8%
Men’s Clothing	27.4%	26.3%	-1.2%	7.1%	6.5%	12.8%	12.6%
Men’s Shoes	28.0%	27.1%	-1.0%	4.5%	5.5%	3.8%	2.6%
Women’s Clothing	39.0%	37.1%	-1.8%	8.1%	7.8%	7.0%	6.6%
Women’s Shoes	31.9%	32.7%	+0.8%	5.3%	3.8%	3.1%	3.1%

Strategic Recommendations

The seasonal patterns and category-level dynamics observed in this analysis point to clear opportunities for retailers to reduce preventable returns, strengthen product performance, and protect margin across the Spring Peak Season. While overall return rates appear stable year-over-year, the underlying drivers – sizing, color guidance, and category-specific volatility – are highly dynamic.

The following strategies are designed to translate these report findings into targeted, high-impact actions that can build durable resilience into a retail operating model.

Strategy	Insights	Actions
Investigate the May reversal in Men's categories	Men's Clothing and Men's Shoes reversed a three-month upward trend in a single month, a pattern not seen elsewhere in the dataset.	• Audit May's promotional calendar, size-chart updates, and return-reason codes for Men's product • Determine whether the improvement reflects durable process change or a temporary shift in mix
Target footwear fit guidance ahead of next Spring's peak	Both Men's and Women's Shoes show the widest month-to-month swings in size-bracketing adoption of any category.	• Strengthen shoe-specific size guides (width, break-in behavior) • Highlight verified-fit customer reviews • Evaluate hybrid or extended return windows specifically for footwear
Replicate what's working in Women's Clothing	Consistent year-over-year improvement across all four months suggests effective sizing or content interventions are already taking hold.	• Document what changed in this category's PDP content, sizing tools, or vendor practices • Test transferring those practices to Men's Clothing and footwear
Build a monthly, not event-based, monitoring cadence for Spring	Spring Peak Season builds and recedes gradually across four months rather than pivoting on a single date; a phase-based Q4 lens will miss the April crest.	• Stand up monthly return-rate and bracketing dashboards for February–May • Align Spring merchandising and marketing calendars to the observed April peak

About Returnalyze®

Unlike returns management software that can tell you what returns have happened, Returnalyze synthesizes billions of intersecting data points to surface the patterns, behaviors, and root causes of preventable returns. And just as fast, it prescribes and assigns prioritized fixes to the retail teams best suited to act on them. A closed-loop system tracks the impact of every action – in dollars.

Today, the world's leading retailers rely on Returnalyze to protect margin, strengthen product performance, and create frictionless customer experiences through proactive returns-prevention strategies.

Returnalyze®

The retail industry sees escalating return rates. Returnalyze sees...

- Which attributes are driving preventable returns
- Where bracketing is accelerating
- How peak-season behavior is shifting
- Where margin is being avoidably lost
- And much more

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