
The ecommerce guide to boost holiday season margins

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INTRODUCTION

2015 holiday predictions

Holiday shopping predictions are out and customer spending habits are looking up for retailers. This year, holiday sales are expected to see a **5.7% year-over-year increase** to \$885.70 billion — the largest jump since 2011's 6.3% rise and just what the industry needs after **first half challenges**.

Customers were more frugal during 2014's holiday season, but this year, shoppers are expected to increase their spend thanks to increases in wages, decreased unemployment and a greater

willingness to spend in categories other than gas, for which prices have dropped substantially. Much of this shopping will take place through online stores, as ecommerce is expected to claim a larger portion of total retail purchases. While ecommerce drove **8.3% of sales** in 2014, its share is predicted to increase to 9% for the upcoming season.

Holiday sales are expected to see a 5.7% year-over-year increase to \$885.70 billion.

Despite this, don't expect customers to open their wallets without having done their due diligence with online research and pricing comparisons. Omnichannel trends

and a rapid increase in mobile shopping will play a major role in shaping customer behavior and, therefore, impact how top retailers should strategize.

This year, mobile commerce has captured **nearly 30%** of the total U.S. ecommerce sales and is projected to reach **\$104.1 billion** by the end of the year. By 2016,

experts see this number increasing rapidly at a rate **300% faster** than the rest of the ecommerce industry. Aside from the purchases people are making on their mobile devices, **75% of customers** use their mobiles to compare prices and research products in-store, including the **two-thirds of Pinterest users** who browse pins while walking the aisles.

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For the approaching holiday season, mobile will likely continue its vital impact on the overall ecommerce outlook, from top-of-funnel acquisition to conversion. Retailers can prepare for this trending customer behavior with optimized omnichannel offerings, responsive designs and filtered search capabilities.

The stakes are high among this season's retail competition. In order to compete with big brands and online marketplaces, SMBs must start their holiday season planning now and keep customer spending habits and shopping desires top-of-mind. Whether you need personalized inbound marketing, cohesive social and email marketing campaigns and customer-centric brand experience, we've gathered the tips you need to start your planning early and sell more this holiday season.

CHAPTER 1

Execute ecommerce campaigns

When it comes to holiday shopping, rarely do customers save all of their shopping for the last minute. In fact, **29% of consumers** began shopping before Halloween in 2014. So, as you plan out your holiday campaigns, remember this: the earlier, the more widespread, the better.

To compete with big box brands this year, fostering a consistent brand experience for your customers across all channels is key. Step back and plan before you begin

writing blog posts or crafting email nurture streams. Evaluate your wins and losses from last year's strategy and determine your holiday season goals. The more big picture planning you do early on, the less you will have to worry about whether a promotion aligns with your overall strategy when time is tight.

29% of consumers began their holiday shopping before Halloween in 2014.

Creating Your Holiday Marketing Campaign Calendar

The first step to preparing your business for the holiday season and establishing consistency is to create a holiday campaign calendar. This will display the relevant

events of the holiday season alongside the promotions you are planning. You should consider crucial dates such as:

- When you will launch advertising campaigns for promotions (and where)
- When you will send initial and follow-up email promotions
- When you will post blogs and what the topic will be
- If you have a brick-and-mortar, when you will change in-store merchandising
- When you will launch pop-up shops

Campaign calendars take time to develop, but prove their own worth once the holiday season reaches its peak and you need to reference your planning efficiently. Help your customers through the stress of the holidays with well-timed promotions and a logical progression of content. Your campaign calendar is your chance to decide how the pieces of your holiday marking fit together and form a cohesive strategy. Then, of course, be sure to assign each task to specific people to stay organized and ahead of schedule.

Once the calendar is complete, don't wait to write blog posts and create digital assets. Set a goal to prepare as much as you can before October, and then automate to save time later. Use Bigcommerce app HubShop.ly to sync your customer data, write personalized inbound emails and create workflows to increase average customer lifetime value.

Remember, the more campaign preparation you do now, the more you can focus on serving your customers during the height of the shopping season. To begin your own campaign calendar, use this framework to plan your strategy around major retail industry dates.

2015 HOLIDAY

Campaign Calendar

October 12

Columbus Day

Believe it or not, holiday selling begins! Start with marketing campaigns that focus on the benefits of shopping early.

November 11

Veterans Day

Announce an early holiday season promotion and get a jumpstart on your competitors.

November 26

Grey Thursday

Each year, Black Friday sales are pushed earlier and earlier. Be aware of when your competitors start their Thanksgiving weekend promotions.

November 27

Black Friday

Encourage your shoppers to avoid the crowds and shop online with special promotions and shipping deals.

November 28

Small Business Saturday

Remind holiday shoppers to buy local with deals at your brick-and-mortar or pop-up shop.

November 30

Cyber Monday

Attract customers with an optimized website and top tier brand experience. It is also wise to launch a discount campaign on this day to win over new customers.

December 1

Giving Tuesday

Nearly 90% of consumers would switch to a charitable brand given similar price and quality. Donate a portion of your revenue to your favorite charity this holiday season.

December 7

Green Monday

Take advantage of the best online sales day in December with email and social promotions.

December 14

Stamp & Ship Day

Remind your customers of the last day to order Christmas gifts with standard shipping and consider offering free shipping — 88% of shoppers would choose your store for it.

December 23

Gift Card Day

It's not too late! Provide an easy way for customers to still delight their loved ones on Christmas.

December 26

Coupon Code Day

The holiday shopping season doesn't have to be over yet. Offer promotions to clear out extra holiday stock and capitalize on customers still in the gift-buying mood.

January 1

New Year's Day

Engage customers with email campaigns that will support their 2016 resolutions.

CHAPTER 2

Rethink SEO and content

It is no surprise that search engine optimization is a vital step for newly launched businesses. But for growing SMBs, being diligent about upkeeping your SEO is just as important.

SEO might not be at the top of your priority list, though, when it comes to preparing for the holiday selling season. Keep in mind that no matter the size of your business, SEO is never something that is complete.

Instead, it requires periodic attention over time with calculated trial and error. Use this approaching holiday season as a reminder to revisit and update your SEO strategy.

SEO is never something that is complete. Instead, it requires periodic attention over time with calculated trial and error.

Improving your SEO does not happen overnight. To earn higher page rankings and conversions when it matters most, start the process well before the holiday season. While November might be okay to whip up a last minute blog post, it can take a few weeks for Google's bots to scan your site and for you to fine tune your keywords. Below, we've gathered a few best practices to help you start the SEO update process early and make sure your promotions are seen this holiday shopping season.

Analyze Where You Are

Before you start changing title tags and purchasing Adwords, analyze the current state of your SEO. Without a quick check of your organic search performance, you can do more harm than good. Explore which pages are yielding the most views and longest time on page from Google Analytics. Cross-check these results with your top performing keywords. This will give you a good idea as to what you are already doing well.

Remember, there are certain pages, such as your homepage, that are most likely already doing well. Tweaking your keywords might not impact your overall performance too much.

Instead, focus on optimizing pages that are performing in the middle of the pack.

Focus on optimizing pages that are performing in the middle of the pack.

Know Your Keywords

More than likely, you already have a list of top-performing keywords for your business. However, forming a list of holiday-specific keywords will help your business attract new customers searching for the perfect gift. Dig into [Google Trends reports](#) to discover which search terms customers are frequently using and update your keywords for these changes.

Write Now, Not Later

Once you have a list of holiday-specific keywords, it may be tempting to push off your blog writing until later in the holiday season. But, the longer you wait to put those keywords to action, the less impactful they will be on your store's search success. In fact, it takes time for Google to scan your changes. According to the

45-Day rule, publishing your content a week before a major holiday will allow you to engage in 50% of the search engine traffic, while starting 45 days in advance will help you participate in over 90% of the search traffic.

Hint Toward What's to Come

In the theme of starting early, create holiday preview pages to tell your loyal customer base what is coming soon. Even if you haven't completely finished your online merchandising for your holiday line, post a few buzz-worthy styles as a sneak peak. Not only will this excite your customers, but it will work in favor of your SEO.

Use coming soon pages to start building links and begin ranking on relevant holiday search queries. Better yet, the Google bots like to see well-ranking pages that are

consistently updated. So, launch with a few items or a coming soon message, and then update it regularly during the holiday season. This will boost traffic to that page and ultimately drive increased holiday sales.

Publish content 45 days in advance to participate in over 90% of the search traffic.

Be Smart with Your Links

SEO is all about links, both internal and external, that increase both the credibility of your content and the chance that people will find your page. As you take inventory of your existing SEO performance, make a note of which pages are already doing well. As you strategize where to include internal links, use these landing pages to display holiday promotions and optimize exposure that already exists.

To build up your external links, use the holiday season for **blogger outreach**. The more trusted voices you have talking about your product, the better your product pages will perform on search engines.

Create Holiday Gift Guides

Gift guides do particularly well because they offer a wide variety of products shoppers are likely searching for or will share on social media. In addition, prominently advertised gift guides decrease the number of clicks between your homepage and your holiday product pages. This is a plus for SEO bots scouring your site, as well as a helpful tool to convert shoppers who search by general terms such as, “best holiday gifts for girls” or “top technology gifts.” Be sure to use a gift guide technology or create a new webpage rather than launching a micro-site. The difference here is in where this page lives:

- **Webpage:** www.yourstore.com/holiday
- **Micro-site:** holiday.yourstore.com

This might not seem like a big difference, but for SEO it is huge. The first link will reap the benefits of all the SEO your site has already gained. The second has to start from scratch. Opt for webpages, not micro-sites.

Revisit Your Load Times

Every **one-second delay** in page load time decreases customer satisfaction by 16% and conversion rates by 7%. Use the holiday season as a reminder to revisit the load times of your top landing pages. In Google Analytics, visit the Site Speed tab to monitor load times and cross check this with your page performance.

Your photos could be the culprit if you site load time lags. Remember to save all images for the web (you can do this in Photoshop) or use a converter tool to compress large images. **TinyPNG** and **jpeg-optimizer** are good options.

Aim Toward Google Shopping

Getting your product feed into Google Shopping is a sure way to gain visibility from

potential buyers and improve customer loyalty. Not only do Google Shopping feeds have a higher conversion rate than other forms of PPC, but they also have a lower cost-per-click. To learn more about getting your products in the feed and achieving the status of Google Trusted Store, follow this [step-by-step guide](#).

Don't Forget About Mobile

Last year, [28% of all holiday retail sales](#) were influenced by shopping-related mobile searches. Similar trends have continued this year as omnichannel selling becomes the standard of the retail industry. Therefore, it is more vital than ever that businesses adhere to [Mobilegeddon's](#) responsive mobile site mandate for this holiday season.

Indeed, [75% of shoppers](#) use their mobile devices in-store to research products while 25% make purchases on their smartphones in-store. And, as on-the-go shoppers will be in a hurry

to complete their shopping, [local SEO](#) will influence whether your business appears at the top of their mobile search. Before the holiday season begins, be sure your store is ready for mobile shoppers.

Last year, 28% of all holiday retail sales were influenced by mobile searches.

There is no denying that the holiday season is the busiest time of year for both online and brick-and-mortar retailers. However, don't use this as an excuse to let your SEO performance slip through the cracks. Set aside some time to revisit how your website is ranking on Google and if your mobile store is ready for the holiday rush. If your organic search results are not what you would hope, remember that the earlier you start making updates, the better.



CHAPTER 3

Strategize social media

Social media, like all parts of running a business, suffers when put off until the last minute. Unfortunately, with the time committed to writing blog posts, importing new projects to your online store and perfecting your merchandising, it is tempting to let social media fall to the back burner — waiting until the week of, or even day of, to write your posts. But as a result, you may find yourself looking back at a disjointed holiday social presence not in line with the rest of your marketing efforts.

This holiday season, start your social media preparations early. With a social media content calendar, you can build out your posts weeks in advance. And in conjunction to your campaign calendar, you can feel confident that you are creating a consistent brand experience that builds true brand followers.

A social media calendar will help you create a consistent brand experience.

Before the preparation period passes, follow these steps to ensure your social presence stands up to the most important selling season for retailers.

Schedule Posts in Advance

Blog posts are not the only writing you should be completing early. While your campaign calendar organizes the big picture of how your promotions and blog posts interact, create a separate social media content calendar to track your posts across all of your social media channels. Begin writing these posts as soon as you can. Not only will this save time later when the rush of the holiday season is upon you, but it will also give you time to have each social media post edited and approved by at least one other member of your communications team.

As you form your calendar, don't be afraid to repurpose social posts across your various channels. Use September to perfect the content and voice of your posts, as well as plan optimal

timing. The more you do now, the more you can focus your social media efforts on responding to customers once the holiday season is in full swing. Use native scheduling features on Facebook and third-party Twitter schedulers such as [Buffer](#) or [Hootsuite](#) to never miss a beat.

The more you plan now, the more you can focus your social media efforts on customer service later.

Prepare Your Visuals

Creating visual elements can be one of the most time consuming tasks of running your company's social media. As you fill content into your social media calendar, begin crafting the visuals as soon as you can. Save each of your files in folders by posting week and name your final visuals accordingly. This will save you from the headache of searching through a desktop of illogically named screenshots later on. If you're looking for a quick and easy way to create cool photos, use Photoshop or [Canva](#). Also, you can find free stock imagery on sites like [StockSnap.io](#) or [Death to the Stock Photo](#).

Feature Your Products Strategically

As you build out your social media content, be strategic with the portion of posts you dedicate to featuring your products. Twitter suggests businesses follow the 80/20 rule: 80% of your tweets should focus on driving interactions with your followers, such as retweets, replies and favorites. Only 20% should link back to product features or special promotions.

When you do feature your products, follow [photography best practices](#) for merchandising your products online. Use high-quality photos to showcase your products in action whenever possible to inspire your audience. Many of the visuals you will need throughout the holiday season will be for your ads.

Good news here for all Bigcommerce clients — with [Bigcommerce Ads](#), you can conquer ad targeting in a breeze. Advertising through the platform will optimize

your marketing investment by automatically targeting to your audience, as well as importing product images and details. In the busy holiday season, this adds up to more time to focus on your customers.

Bigcommerce Ads automatically targets your audience and imports product images and details.

Create a Consistent Experience

Coordinate your holiday branding across each of your social media platforms. Use the cover photos to illustrate your brand personality and showcase a few of your featured holiday products. Just like in your advertisements, choose photos that show your products in real-life settings to make it easier for customers to picture themselves with their potential purchase.

Set a Standard of Real-time Engagement

With early preparations out of the way and a completed social media calendar, you can spend the busiest part of the holiday season interacting with your customers. Use social media to ask your followers how they are celebrating the holiday season, relating each post back to your brand personality.

Customers will often use social media to contact you with customer service requests. Be quick to respond and thoughtful with each of your answers. In fact, **42%**

of shoppers who contact a

brand via social media expect a response within 60 minutes. Use each interaction with a customer as an opportunity for positive word-of-mouth marketing.

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Give Back

Tis the season of giving, even for retailers. Consider a charity or cause you can donate a percentage of your revenue to for a portion of the holiday season. Since **nearly 90% of consumers** say they would switch to a charitable brand given similar price and quality, it is likely worth it for your business. Once you pick a cause, look for opportunities to add a social spin to your efforts and encourage your followers to share your posts with special promotions.

In all, consider how you can use your social media platforms for something more during the holidays. Start early to give yourself the bandwidth to focus on customer engagement during the height of the selling season. By removing the barrier between you and your customers, you will improve their brand experience and encourage customer loyalty that lasts beyond the holiday rush.



CHAPTER 4

Prioritize customer experience

Successful holiday selling is about more than scoring high profits during November and December and making up for the slow seasons. After the presents are opened and holiday stress subsides, a holistic analysis of your year-over-year growth can be a better indicator of a retailer's impact over the holidays.

This sort of prolonged growth is often a direct result of exceptional customer service. Businesses that cultivate a positive buyer experience, from initial social media interaction to predictable delivery, win loyalty and word-of-mouth marketing.

Similarly, merchants who fail to match customer service expectations during the holiday season don't just miss that one unhappy customer's purchase, but the business of many more potential buyers. Consider these **detrimantal results** of poor customer service:

- 78% of consumers cancel a transaction because of poor customer service
- Americans tell an average of nine people about good experiences, but 16 people about poor experiences
- It takes 12 positive reviews to make up for one unresolved negative review
- 59% of U.S. shoppers would try a new brand for a better service experience

For online merchants, providing good customer service involves matching expectations long established by brick-and-mortar retailers. While convenience is a clear selling point for online shopping, sellers must compensate for the positive parts of an in-store experience, including personal attention, personalized consulting and immediate answers. In fact, **64% of shoppers** say in-store experience has a greater influence on their purchasing decision than online research. This means for online sellers, there is little room for an bad service.

As you prepare for the busiest period of the year, here are a few tips to help your online business build upon the best parts of an in-store experience, while still competing with the low prices of larger online brands.

Provide Different Customer Service Options

Not all online shoppers are alike. And, when it comes to customer service, this could not be more true. While each buyer expects exceptional service, they may have their own preference in how they get this help. Consider this: **One in three** customers prefer to handle customer service over the phone, and 39% believe it is the most effective channel for customer service — yet, nearly 50% of customers find it the most frustrating channel for customer service.

One in three shoppers prefer to handle customer service over the phone, yet nearly 50% find it the most frustrating channel.

In other words, don't prioritize one customer service channel over another. For your phone service, make it easy for customers to find your number by placing it on the header and footer of every page. To avoid long hold times, consider bringing on extra customer service help for the holiday season, but also make sure these new

agents are well-trained and knowledgeable enough to answer any question. Phone service app **Grasshopper** will help direct calls to the correct service workers at the correct time, preventing you from having to staff a 24/7 call center.

For those customers frustrated with hold times and in search of quick answers, include a live chat window at the bottom corner of your store. Try **Olark Chat** to give your customers

an easy way to talk to a brand representative. Finally, set a precedent of replying to every customer service request on Facebook and keeping track of people mentioning your brand on Twitter through **TweetDeck**.

88% of shoppers would choose merchants who offer free shopping over those who don't.

Consider Shipping Incentives

Today, it is impossible for online retailers to ignore the **shipping expectations** set by large brands on online marketplaces such as Amazon. Although it may not be possible for your brand to offer free shipping year-around because of tight margins, consider offering the incentive for at least a portion of the holiday season. Studies show **88% of shoppers** will choose merchants who offer free shipping over those who don't.

As the days dwindle before Christmas, be an advocate for your customer and remind them of Stamp and Ship Day — the last day to order gifts with standard shipping and still receive them on time. Ultimately, it is always best to be as transparent as possible about shipping costs, delivery speeds and return policies.

Keep Your Inventory in Check

Maintaining enough inventory without over-ordering is part of business as usual for

any retailer. And, during the heavy order volume of the holiday season, omnichannel selling through marketplaces and pop-up shops can make keeping track of inventory numbers especially difficult. Don't lose one of the **79% of holiday shoppers** who will switch brands if an item is out of stock. Use a cloud-based centralized inventory system to cover all of your selling channels. By using an inventory system such as **Stitch Labs**, you'll be able to centralize your data and run a leaner retail operation — all without causing a customer service headache.

Go Beyond the Brown Box

Delight your customers with packaging just as beautiful as the presents they will wrap and place under the tree. If there is one time during the calendar year to put a little extra spend behind the presentation of your products, the holiday season is it. While brick-and-mortars have the luxury of decorating their store with holiday-specific merchandising, online retailers must go beyond the traditional cardboard box to make their brand stand out. Even the smallest handmade touch will personalize the shopping experience and encourage the buyer to visit again after the end of the year.

As omnichannel becomes the shopping norm, the line between customer expectations of brick-and-mortars and online stores will continue to blur. This holiday season, impress your customers with a consistently

superior experience from the time they live chat a customer service agent about a potential purchase until the moment they open their package. Retailers who want long-term results from their holiday selling should look at all of their services through the big-picture lens of overall customer experience.

Omnichannel continues to blur the line between customer expectations of brick-and-mortars and online stores.

CHAPTER 5

Track your success

No matter the industry, today's most successful businesses rely on data to make each of their merchandising and marketing decisions. This holiday season, don't wait until the year's end to evaluate the success of your selling strategy. By tracking analytics throughout the planning and execution process, you will be able to make tweaks to your selling strategy and be confident that each decision is rooted in real-time results.

To help you see growth that lasts beyond this holiday season and into the next year, we've gathered a few practical steps to make intelligent decisions about your business without paying extensive prices to do so.

Before the holiday shopping season reaches its peak, set conversion goals for your main landing pages and content.

Set up Conversion Goals

Before the holiday shopping season reaches its peak, take the time to **set conversion goals** for your main landing pages and content. This way, you'll be able to monitor the visibility of your promotions and how consumers are engaging

with them. Within Google Analytics, use destination goals to track when website users complete an action, such as signing up for an email newsletter or making a purchase. Use duration goals to monitor when a user's visit exceeds or falls below your set threshold.

Track Your Campaigns and Content

Although it is important to link to your promotions on as many strategic locations as possible, this can make evaluating the various entry-points of your funnel challenging to separate. But with custom campaign tracking, you can evaluate success of your promotions on a page by page basis. Use Google's URL Builder to create [UTM tags](#) for the links you will use in each of your email and advertising campaigns. This way, once you are in Google Analytics, you can distinguish clicks from your follow-up email versus your final reminder email, or your banner ad on one page versus your banner ad on another.

Productivity is key for any business looking to scale quickly and prove sustainable for the long-term.

Allow Data to Drive Your Decisions

Productivity is key for any business looking to scale quickly and prove sustainable for the long-term. The more centralized your business operations are, the easier this challenge becomes. With Bigcommerce's enterprise-grade [analytics reports](#), online sellers of any size can review all of their metrics in one place for no extra cost, taking the mystery out of data-driven decisions.

Even if you find yourself late in the game of holiday preparations, setting up conversion goals and monitoring your purchase funnel will save time and energy

for next year's top selling season. Form habits of watching your analytics for the rest of the year and follow which products are doing well and which ones are going cold. Then, continuously update your online merchandising based on these wins and losses.

In all, holiday success stories are not made in a few weeks — they are the results of months of planning and bring growth and customer loyalty that lasts long after the year ends.

Conclusion

In all, holiday sales for 2015 are expected to see a **5.7% year-over-year increase**. To make the most of the growing ecommerce landscape, let customer experience be the theme of all your planning, remembering that omnichannel trends will drive this holiday season more than ever before.

The earlier you begin, the more time you will have to ensure you are customer-centric in each of your choices. Start now by creating the content for your social media, blog and holiday landing pages — all optimized with SEO, of course. Then, once the height of the holiday selling season is upon us, you can focus your energy on what matters most: customer service.

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