

ONLINE

MARKETING GUIDE FOR THE

HOLIDAYS



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Online Marketing Guide for the Holidays: 2011 Edition

Holiday sales in 2011 are forecasted to be 3% higher than the previous year as American retailers sell nearly half a trillion dollars of merchandise. Over \$60 billion of that will be sold online, up 13.5% from 2010.

The Future Is Guided by the Past

The first step towards a successful online holiday season is to review what worked well for your brand in the previous holidays:

- The [subject lines](#) and preheaders
- The dates, days of the week and time of day they were sent
- The particular offers of discounts, free shipping, coupons, etc.
- The segmentation strategy
- The dynamic content you included

Although you should not make this year's holiday campaign a carbon copy of the previous one, there are other factors to consider, such as whether you followed the lead of the majority of e-tailers and increased your frequency during November and December of last year. Even though you may have previous permission from your subscribers to vary your frequency during the holidays, there is no escaping the inevitable list churn that is triggered by any increase of [email newsletter](#) sends. If your experience from last year is that the loss of subscribers was minor enough to outweigh the increased sales, then you can let that trend guide you in this holiday season.



In the careful evaluation of the positive and negative factors of your previous holiday campaign you should consider the elements that created movement on the success scale in either direction, and it should not solely be an application of the conversion rate. It is important to analyze all of your approaches to determine the ones that increased spam complaints, or conversely scored more highly on viral qualities that allowed them to be forwarded and shared to a greater degree.

The growth of mobile device access has created a situation where operating an online business without a mobile friendly website version is roughly equivalent to not having a website at all. Integrating your cross-channel campaign is of even greater impact this year than last, so whatever efforts you previously expended on coordinating your email newsletters with your [social media](#) and mobile device campaigns should be increased this holiday season.



T-Minus 2 Months & Counting

It was traditional to wait until after Thanksgiving to launch your holiday advertising campaigns, but this date has been creeping back year by year until the majority of e-tailers now begin well before Halloween. Whatever date you launched your holiday messaging last year might merit being pushed up by a week or so to reinforce the value of your seasonal promotions to your subscribers and followers. Some major e-tailers are even taking the momentous step of expanding **Black Friday** to a Black November where the traditional super-discounted deals of that hot sales day are extended weeks earlier.



As with every other aspect of online marketing, you must strike a balance between dilating Black Friday to the entire month (at the prospect of increasing sales) and diluting the impact on the consumer of the ultra-special deals to be found on that day only. For all the valid reasons for keeping your holiday campaign short, sharp and to the point, there are e-tailers that completely ignore this logic and find extremely long holiday strategies highly successful. Hallmark actually launches its holiday campaign in July!

Schedule to Follow or Buck the Trend?

Cyber Monday is traditionally the day when the highest number of email newsletters are sent, considerably ahead of Black Friday and the days leading up to it. The pre-Christmas Fridays follow in popularity as e-tailers have found that this schedule prepares the subscriber for purchasing over the weekend. The determination is yours as to whether you decide to follow or buck that trend. There are many superlative reasons why adhering to this schedule equals online sales success, but you can be certain your competitors are considering the same factors. There is a flurry of incoming email piling up in your subscribers' inboxes on those dates, which may crowd out your message. Choosing to send on the previous day, such as Cyber Sunday and on the Thursdays in early December, could help your email stand out among the throng.



The weekend after Thanksgiving has been allocated the Cyber moniker, but the boost in sales is emphatically not limited to purveyors of netbooks and hard drives. This “black weekend” may have its roots in electronics merchandising, but with the adoption of these dates for heavily discounted holiday events by literally every major online and brick & mortar re-tailer, the proper marketing strategy will see shoes, toys and cosmetics flying out of your warehouse just as fast as tablets and monitors.

Provide Options for the Credit-Challenged

If your merchandise revolves around Rolex or Louis Vuitton you can blithely ignore economic realities, but for most e-tailers it is important to craft holiday [email marketing campaigns](#) with an eye to the dire financial straits of an unprecedented number of American families. More than a quarter of all consumers no longer have credit cards, so promoting alternative forms of payment such as debit cards or PayPal can help you capture this “lost generation.” Layaway is swiftly regaining popularity as some e-tailers find that offering some form of prolonged payment plan can help consumers with low income or low credit scores to purchase their products and services.

Ship, Ship, Hurray!

Shipping plays an important role in any holiday marketing and has long presented an obstacle to low invoice amount sales. Consumers will not pay \$20 to obtain a \$10 item, so unless it can be bundled into a larger order, lower value items continue to not be a factor in online holiday sales. Many e-tailers find that free shipping programs can be a powerful incentive to selling tangible products, as long as the courier or postal costs can be adequately absorbed into the margin of the overall sale.

There are alternatives to free shipping offers, which can also motivate consumers. Allowing your email subscribers and social media followers to set a delivery date in the future can assist them in shopping early. E-tailers with widespread brick & mortar networks have found considerable success in offering in-store pickup. Not only are all shipping costs to the consumer’s residence eliminated, but it can also help boost sales during the famous last minute holiday rush for the considerable number of consumers who procrastinate their gift purchases until just a day or two before D-Day and have fallen out of the feasible shipping window.

Consistency is imperative in your shipping option offerings. Consumers will be confused if you offer free shipping on Cyber Weekend but then not again until the second weekend of December. If you’re going to take the plunge into a specific shipping strategy, it is best to implement it right across your online holiday marketing rather than forcing your subscriber or follower to hopscotch dates in order to obtain the best shipping deal.

Leveraging Headers & Footers

There is much more to customizing your online presence for the holidays than slapping Santa and snowflakes across your backgrounds. Your website, email newsletters and social media pages should all feature some form of seasonally specific header, navigation bar, or other prominent link to Holiday or Gifts. Making that link stand out from the rest of the content is critical to obtaining those all-important clicks, so placing the Gifts link within a bow-wrapped red



[Click Gift](#)

box or adorning the Holiday one with colored lights (as long as you resist the temptation to have them blink) can help draw your customer's eye to the position.

Footers proposing gift services are able to integrate a considerable number of service links into a single, graphically coherent presentation. These graphics can incorporate links to your gift center or registry; promote a variety of gift cards; group gifts by price point; and even display a countdown to specific dates, such as the last day to place an order and receive assurance of standard or express delivery to the customer's specific zip code captured via IP or from your subscription list.



Stake Your Claim to Social Media Gold

Promoting through social media in the holiday season is a priority for all online marketers. Here are just some of the tactics that have proven successful:

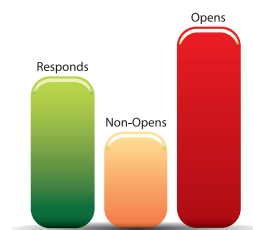
- Offer advice on holiday issues & ask questions to spark conversation
- Customize your approach to each different social network
- Run seasonal sweepstakes, essay or photo contests, and various giveaways
- Encourage customer reviews by offering incentives
- Broadcast limited time deals
- Post Gift of the Day ideas
- Provide sneak peeks and early access to discounts
- Reward sharing of your deals content, coupons & offers
- Launch a relevant 12 Days of Christmas promotion
- Motivate customers to provide personal data through surveys & polls
- Establish a pre-holiday baseline to determine your holiday campaign's success
- Listen to the social media chatter about your brand through monitoring services
- Embed holiday-specific [QR codes](#) on your social network pages
- Tie in your holiday promotions to fundraising for charitable organizations
- Leverage location based services to bring your seasonal campaign into the hyperlocal arena
- Facilitate two-way conversations to provide customer service
- Post-holiday, create an auction function to clear out returns through your Facebook, [Google+](#) or Twitter presence



The 2011 holidays will be conducted on social media more than in any other time in history, so the wise brands who can engage their followers through the channel will see the greatest bottom-line benefits.

Targeting Holiday Ads

Testing is what separates the professionals from the amateurs in email and social media marketing, and ad copy including Pay Per Click (PPC) is no exception. Applying the various freely available tools such as Google's AdWords Editor and Campaign Experiments can assist you in gathering the critical data you need to measure modifications to your seasonal keywords, ad groups, placements and bids. Similarly, Google Trends is a preferred resource that can help you identify seasonal terms to integrate into your PPC campaign. You will find that certain terms habitually increase in the fourth quarter of each year and those are the ones that have an established track record for being high in holiday demand.



Many online marketers have adopted the successful policy of adding a holiday, Christmas, Hanukkah or other seasonal term to their existing highly ranked keywords in order to target consumers' gift shopping. Another benefit of this strategy is that optimizing specific [landing pages](#) for these long-tail keywords can help your organic rankings. Creating a different PPC campaign for each phase of the holiday shopping season can help you target the various types of consumers. You can offer discounts for early shopping to bolster the launch of your seasonal promotions, and encourage last-minute shoppers that there is still time to secure express shipping in time to place the item under the tree.

Daily Deals Move Product if You Can Slash Your Margins

Daily deals and other forms of coupons and special offers during the holidays can act as a double edged sword for online marketers. It is clear that the addition of these types of discounts can boost holiday sales, but in many cases the lower price required to make the coupon attractive cuts too far into the product's margin to be sustainable. Daily deals and coupons are best for loss leaders as long as your entire strategy is integrated into the offer so that you are proposing and "gently prodding" the consumer towards a selection of more reasonably priced merchandise.

Many e-tailers are discovering that the economics of major deal sites are prohibitive, as they generally require a 50% commission on top of the price to the consumer, which is also around 50% off. If you can't afford to sell a \$100 product for just over \$20 then the deal sites are not for you. By placing deeply discounted daily deals and coupons exclusively within your email and social media marketing campaigns, you can bypass the major deal site commission and keep all you earn. The flip side to this strategy is that if you have a warehouse full of merchandise that you want to blow out regardless of cost, the major deal sites can empty it in a heartbeat.



Prior to engaging in any daily deal or coupon offer, meticulously evaluate how

many products you can afford to sell in order to determine a cap number. This calculation should be based not only on financial factors but also in consideration of the stress that the rush to buy will place on your personnel, shipping and receiving, and website capacity. If your coupon crashes your server, backs up shipping past Christmas, or causes a three-hour on-hold pileup on your customer service toll free line, you're sabotaging your entire holiday campaign.

Balancing Secular vs. Religious Terms & Icons

Secularism is becoming a primary keyword in our multi-cultural society, so avoiding icons that have specific religious meaning such as nativity scenes and even Christmas trees in [online marketing](#) can be a prudent policy. Yule logs, holly, mistletoe and candles, as well as the *Tannenbaum* tree, all predate Christianity but have taken on an indelible connection to Christmas in our age. The popular shortening of Christmas to Xmas is even more controversial as the X originates from the use of the Greek letter chi, which represents an abbreviation for Christ.



On the other hand, major retailers such as Wal-Mart, Target and Home Depot, who de-emphasized Christmas and substituted "Holiday," were soon forced by public outcry to reinstate the Christian term. The Gap was boycotted by the American Family Association for their avoidance of the word Christmas and the group was not mollified by a quickly launched TV ad campaign that featured the lyrics: "Go Christmas, go Hanukkah, go Kwanzaa, go solstice... go Christmas, go Hanukkah, go whatever holiday you Wannakuh," as they objected to the pagan reference to the solstice.

There is no disputing that online marketers need to achieve a fine balance in their desire to appeal to the widest spectrum of consumers while not offending religious sensibilities. Although Santa Claus is indisputably the modern metamorphosis of Saint Nicholas, the vast majority of the mythology was developed in the last couple of centuries, and it has been masterfully recruited by retailers everywhere. Many believe that the Coca-Cola corporation brilliantly grafted its trademark red and white color scheme onto the character, but it was actually artist Thomas Nast in the mid-19th century who first produced the version of Santa we know today. Santa Claus, his reindeer and the rest of the related symbolism have been so integrated into today's society that it can be generally considered one of the "safe" icons to be harnessed for online marketing.



Symbols to Illustrate the Different Holidays

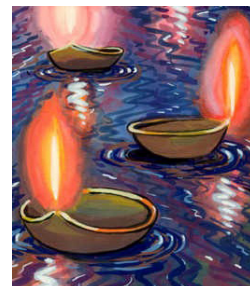
Online marketers who wish to identify specific holidays within the season can apply these primary celebrations and their respective symbols and icons:

African-American – *Kwanzaa* has become a Pan-African celebration of heritage and culture since its inception by Maulana Karenga in 1966. It is celebrated daily from December 26th to January 1st. Primary symbols: The Kinara, a menorah-like candelabra with seven candles; a communal cup; and the black, green and red flag.



Buddhism – *Bodhi* Day celebrated on December 8 is the commemoration of Siddhartha Gautama attaining the enlightenment (Bodhi) that allowed him to become the Buddha. Primary symbols: The eight-spoked Dharma wheel; the Bodhi tree; Buddha's footprints; and a begging bowl.

Christianity – *Christmas* commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ, celebrated on December 25. Primary symbols: The Christmas tree; holly; mistletoe; and the Yule log.



Hinduism – *Pancha Ganapati* is a festival honoring Lord Ganesha and held between December 21 and 25. The primary Hindu holiday is the five day festival known as Diwali, which occurs in October or November. Primary symbols: The sitting elephant god Ganesha; the Aum or Om icon; the fire altar; and the saffron flag.

Judaism – *Hannukkah* is an eight day festival commemorating the rededication of Jerusalem's Second Temple in 165 BCE and falls between late November and year's end, with December 20 being the 2011 date. Primary symbols: The Menorah candelabra; a Dreidel game; gelt coins; and the Hanukkah bush.

Islam – *Eid ul-Adha* is the Festival of Sacrifice, which consecrates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Ishmael. The Islamic Calendar is based on the moon's orbit, not that of the Earth around the sun, so the date varies widely. It will be celebrated on November 7 in 2011, but rotates around to the summer within a decade. Primary symbols: The star and crescent; the green flag; and icons for Allah and the Shahada. Exercise extreme caution as Islam strictly prohibits any graphical representation of the Prophet Muhammad.

Secularism – *Festivus* was popularized on *Seinfeld* and is still essentially a tongue-in-cheek anti-commercialism holiday that is held on December 23. Primary symbols: The Festivus pole; meatloaf; and a cake decorated with M&Ms.

There are many other celebrations around the time of the winter solstice, including various *paganist* and *Saturnalist* festivals; *Yalda* is observed in Iran as the triumph of light over darkness; and *Zamenhof* Day, where Esperantists commemorate their language's originator. In Australia and New Zealand it has become common to also celebrate a *Midwinter Christmas* at the end of June, in the midst of the southern hemisphere's winter.



Go with the Pros

Benchmark Email offers special [email templates](#) specifically for [Christmas](#), [Hanukkah](#), [Kwanzaa](#), and a host of more generic [Happy Holidays](#) versions to suit any online marketing approach. These templates are fully capable of containing any form of video or animation you prefer and customizable to suit any of your seasonal promotional needs. From templates to deliverability, discuss your seasonal online marketing concepts with the professionals at Benchmark Email and discover just how profitable the holidays can be!



About Benchmark Email

Take powerful features by the dozen, sophisticated list management, hundreds of email templates, ultra-precise reports and dazzling email and video email. Now, package all that together for an extremely affordable price. Sound appealing? That's us.

There's a reason – or 100 – that more than 73,000 users trust us with their email marketing campaigns. With a second-to-none feature set, headache-free tools that make every campaign a snap and extremely reasonable price plans, we're the email marketing service for businesses of all shapes and sizes.

At Benchmark, we're more than email marketing experts, we're innovators. Our main aim is to perfect our email marketing service, but we also follow social networking, search engine optimization (SEO) and Web 2.0 just so our 100% Web-based software is completely compatible with the ever-changing Internet world.

No other service gives you this robust, standard range of features for just \$9.95 a month to start. Find out for yourself by enrolling in our free, 30 day trial
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Email: sales@benchmarkemail.com