Is Your Business Ready For the Holidays?

7 Steps to Improve Your Online Holiday Sales

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Every year it seems as if the holiday decorations go up a month earlier than the year before. Christmas sales spring up in every industry from clothing to cars, and fuel the holidays' control of the early Fall months. That's because retailers know what consumers want - to shop early in the season to beat the rush. In fact, 50% of those surveyed in an
Internet Retailer study said they planned to start shopping for holiday gifts in October or earlier.1[1]

If you don't smell the chestnuts yet this year, you should. Most retail stores bulk up their inventory by 20% or more to prepare for the holidays, and they start in August. With the number of people shopping online increasing, it is imperative that online merchants take the same approach to the holidays and get ready early.

To help you prepare, the ecommerce experts at Network Solutions® recommend you follow these seven steps to get your online business ready for the holiday shopping season:

1. Update your product catalog and inventory.
2. Make it easy for your customers to shop for gifts.
3. Enhance your site design with holiday flair.
4. Make potential buyers comfortable about your business.
5. Provide specific delivery lead times.
6. Use Pay Per Click advertising to drive traffic to your site.
7. Use holiday specials to convert shoppers to buyers.

Step 1: Update your product catalog and inventory

Stock up and make sure your inventory numbers are visible on your site. The last thing a holiday shopper wants to see is a backorder — it is estimated that half of shoppers will leave your site to visit another store when an item is out of stock.[2]

Look through your sales logs and determine which are the most popular or best-selling items, then make sure you have plenty available. Also, be sure that you have good stock of anything that you highlight on your homepage or in special categories.

You can also give an additional boost to your sales by adding new products. What are the hot new items in your category that you don't currently carry? Which new products could be compelling holiday gifts? You need to find a source for this merchandise now to have it in time for the holiday season. Good product information sells, so it's important to keep it fresh and compelling. With that in mind, review and update product descriptions during the summer months, before the fall rush. Does your site include the generic descriptions from the manufacturer, or have you taken the time to add your expert perspective? If your customers rave about certain products, be sure to highlight these compliments.

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[1] Internet Retailer, June 21, 2007 Just Ahead, It's (Already) Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas

[2] According to "The Online Inventory Impact Survey," 48% of online shoppers go to another store when they can't find what they want, while 31% came back later to see if it what they want is now in stock. See Article

Step 2: Make it easy for your customers to shop for gifts

Have you ever looked at your website from the perspective of a gift-giver? They have very different needs and shop in very different ways than the typical shopper. It's crucial that you put yourself in their shoes and take a stroll through your website to find any potential changes you could make.

Navigation is very important – it's how your customers find what they're looking for. While the visitors to your website may have been looking for long sleeved t-shirts in
May, in December they could be looking for a gift for Mom. Add category pages that make it easy for them to locate various products for women and you'll get the sale. According to "The Online Inventory Impact Survey," 48% of online shoppers went to another store when they couldn't find what they wanted, while 31% came back later to see if it what they wanted before had been stocked.

Make sure that your navigation supports the holiday shopper with pages like "Gifts for Her" or "Gifts for Dad". Your shoppers always should be able to browse by price ranges as well (e.g., "less than $50," "$50 - $100"), but it's especially important during the holiday season because gift-buyers often have a set budget in mind.

Step 3: Enhance your site design with holiday flair

Add some holiday flair to your store design when the holidays get closer. You can completely revamp the site or update your home page to highlight the upcoming season. Holiday shoppers love it and it reminds other shoppers about the upcoming holiday.

Successful ecommerce websites not only provide customers with what they're looking for, but they also make the process easy and fun. If a customer remembers a positive holiday buying experience, they'll come back when the season is over. (This can apply to other holidays, too. Many sites are redesigning for other holidays such as Halloween, Valentine's Day, and Mother's Day.)

You may not be sold on the idea of adding holiday themes to your storefront design, but it's still a good time to consider updating your design to keep it fresh. The Internet world moves quickly, and potential shoppers can easily spot an "old" looking site. An Internet
Retailer study showed that more than 60% of merchants redesigned their ecommerce sites in the past year.[3]

To make it easy for you to keep your site design fresh, make sure that your ecommerce software allows for multiple site designs. For example, you can make all the necessary changes to your design and navigation on this second design, and then switch back after holiday season is complete. If your ecommerce software doesn't let you save both designs at the same time, you will need to manually make the design changes to your regular site at the beginning and end of each season.

Step 4: Make potential buyers comfortable about your business

In addition to a holiday facelift, make sure that your shoppers feel comfortable purchasing from your website by ensuring that your SSL certificate, demonstrating that your site is encrypted and secure, is prominently displayed. If you don't have an SSL certificate – there has never been a better time to get one. Holiday shoppers look for security when they're checking out. TNS PLC of London notes that 75% of

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[3] As reported in Form & Function, Aug. 2007, Vertical Web Media LLC

shoppers admit that they've abandoned a shopping cart because they were afraid it was not secure.

Further pressing discovered that 90% of them say they would not have abandoned if they had seen some familiar security marker.   SSL certificates deliver the three signs of security Internet shoppers look for: the 'https' in the browser address bar, the closed padlock in the browser and a branded site seal from the security provider.

Do yourself a favor and make sure everyone can see that it's safe to shop on your store.
Make sure you publish your store policies regarding refunds, exchanges, cancellations, and shipping, and make it easy for your customers to access this information. This will also help your shoppers feel more secure about giving you their financial information during a purchase.

Finally, make sure the shopping cart provider you select supports the credit card company security standards. Look for references to Payment Card Industry (PCI) and Cardholder Information Security Program (CISP) compliance. The bottom line is: The more secure your customers feel while shopping on your site, the more inclined they will be to make a purchase.

Step 5: Provide specific delivery lead times

You should make sure that your shipping policy is highlighted on every page that the holiday shopper sees. Make sure you update your shipping options so that there are some fast, last minute choices and make them known. The best ecommerce sites go as far to specify specific delivery dates.

For example, "Orders placed by December 17 will be delivered by December 24."
Holiday shoppers need to know that their gift will arrive in time, plus the countdown reminds late shoppers that time is running out!

Step 6: Use Pay Per Click advertising to drive traffic to your site

Once you have your website ready to take the extra traffic, it's time to focus on how to deliver the traffic. If you don't already have a marketing plan, you should consider things you can implement quickly that will have immediate results. 80% of all internet visits begin at a search engine, so Pay Per Click advertising is an immediate win. This type of advertising, often shortened to PPC, consists of the ads you often see at the very top and at the right of the search engine results pages.

PPC allows you to target a customer audience by the search terms, or keywords, you think that the customer will enter when they begin their holiday gift searches. You only pay when someone clicks on your ad, so once you have your keyword list you should determine how much you are willing to pay, or "bid," per keyword. Your bids, along with the relevance of your offerings to that particular keyword, determine what placement on the search engine page you will get. Choose keywords that are specific to what you offer and you'll get better rankings with lower bid prices.

PPC advertising looks very easy, but there are many insiders' secrets that can increase your success or keep you from making beginner's mistakes. There are blogs and newsletters on the subject that you can study, or if you'd rather spend your time running your business, you can outsource your advertising to a professional PPC firm or agency.
Make sure the PPC agency you choose allows you to be part of the process and offers one-on-one consultations so you can explain your business. Your input and knowledge of your industry is vital in the agency's keyword development and ad copywriting.

There are other forms of advertising online. If you have a niche product, look for any newsletters or email groups that may discuss your niche and see if they accept sponsorship. Find any blogs for your niche that could link to your website, or place ads on them through syndication organizations.

Step 7: Use holiday specials to convert shoppers to buyers

Now that you have your website optimized for traffic and have a plan for driving traffic to your site, it's time to decide how you'll entice your audience. There are many ecommerce stores on the Internet. In this busy season, how will you differentiate yourself? Think of offering deals like free shipping with purchases over a certain amount or free gift wrapping.

Determine your most popular categories and offer discounts on commonly purchased items. Make sure that you have something to set yourself apart from the crowd. Also make sure you update your advertising. Free shipping or gift wrapping makes a wonderful call to action in a PPC ad! With these pointers and a solid product offering, you're sure to increase your chances for a successful holiday season. Remember that no matter what it is – domains, hosting, ecommerce software that supports multiple designs, or PPC analysts that really know what they're doing – Network Solutions® is here to help you sell online successfully!

About Network Solutions®

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Web hosting
Web design
E-commerce software
Search Engine Marketing
SSL Certificates
E-mail services
Domain name registration

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