3 Holiday Trends: Prepare for the Marathon, Not a Sprint

Greg Zakowicz   **September 12, 2017**

The holiday shopping season is the ecommerce version of the Boston Marathon's Heartbreak Hill. It's a season that will challenge retailers, stress them, push them to their limits and, many times, either make or break them. Effectively planning for the final stretch requires not only looking at last year's results, but considering what went well for your peers. Let's look at three trends from last year that will keep you from hitting the wall this year.

Every Day Is a Holiday

Last year, 57 of the 61 days in November and December generated over $1 billion in online sales. In November, 29 of 30 days reached this major milestone. The rise of consumer self-gifting and the tendency of retailers to offer earlier and deeper discounts have contributed to this trend. Premier stand-alone days like Black Friday and Cyber Monday have increasingly given way to Gray November, a month-long discounting period, and consumers have quickly bought into it.

When preparing for the holiday season, don't wait until Black Friday week. Treat the season as a marathon, not a sprint. Many of your competitors will begin their holiday marketing when the calendar flips to November, if not sooner. Planning for an extended holiday season will allow you to better balance the types of promotions and discounts you offer.

Mobile Is King

We all know mobile shopping is growing, and last holiday season really proved that. Mobile accounted for 30% of all online holiday sales, growing nearly 54% and outpacing that of not only retail (4.8%), but also ecommerce (17.8%). Mobile purchasing is becoming more prevalent each year. Expect this trend to continue.

If people are searching more via mobile devices, you would expect paid ad results to follow a similar trend. Predictably, they did. The percentage of paid search clicks on mobile devices has been steadily rising year over year. In Q4, it accounted for nearly 57% of all paid search

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The Resurgence of Black Friday … Online

Everyone knows Black Friday and Cyber Monday have historically been premier seasonal shopping days. But with the emergence of Gray November, they are no longer the "start" of the shopping season – they're merely a part of it. In some respects, they even mark the final days before gift-giving and stocking stuffers become the major marketing theme.

As we know that promotions and consumer shopping now starts at the beginning of November, it's important to plan your special sales around these key dates. Let's look at what we're seeing play out between these two premier days.

Last year, Black Friday online sales totaled $3.34 billion. At that time, it was the largest online shopping day in history. Not only that, but this was the first day ever to see $1 billion in mobile commerce.

The title of history's largest online sales day lasted only a couple of days, however, as Cyber Monday edged it out with $3.45 billion in online sales. Online retailers might expect Cyber Monday to be the prime promotional day of the year, but I believe this is a mistake. Remember: While Cyber Monday is commonly regarded as an online retailer sales day, almost everyone is online nowadays. Cyber Monday is no longer the online version of Black Friday. Black Friday is.

Black Friday has been growing as an online sale day year after year. In fact, it's growing faster than Cyber Monday. Even as close as they were in online sales last year, Black Friday grew nearly 22% year over year, whereas Cyber Monday grew only 12%. Expect Black Friday to be the biggest online shopping day of 2017.

If you are planning your peak sales or promotions around these mid-season days, I would make Black Friday the pinnacle. You don't want to be late to the party and miss out because customers shopped other Black Friday deals. And don't forget that many retailers will start their Black Friday deals prior to Black Friday. Welcome to Gray November!

Plan for Success

Even the best planning won't guarantee success. The season is long, and the hill is steep. But we know consumers will shop – and shop early. We know they will browse and buy on mobile devices. And we know every day will be its own little holiday. A bit of internal analysis and time spent planning for these trends will give you the best chance of crossing the holiday finish line with ease.
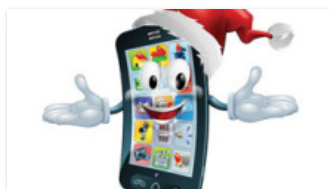
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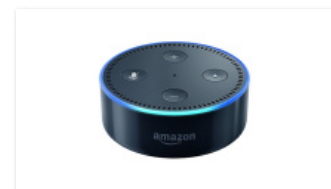
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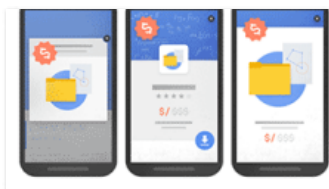
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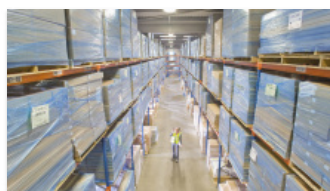Email Expectations vs. Reality: Are You Letting Your Customers Down?

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Being prepared for the holiday rush used to mean stocking shelves and making sure your associates were ready for the long hours. But the digital revolution has changed everything, most importantly, customer expectations. Retailers with a physical store presence should be asking themselves—what am I doing to wow the customer?

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