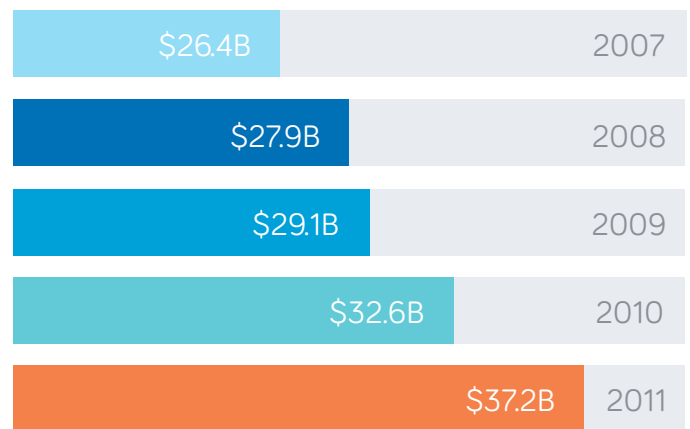


101 ECOMMERCE TIPS

TO BOOST HOLIDAY SALES

comScore recently reported that ecommerce sales in the first half of 2012 have vastly overtaken sales from the first half of 2011. Many are expecting this growth to continue into this year's holiday season, with ecommerce holiday sales projected to reach \$54.5 billion.

But how do you capitalize on this online gold mine without burning your budget? It's simple – go into the game with a solid plan and sell, sell, sell. We're embarking upon the pinnacle of ecommerce, which is why we created these 101 tips for your success. We hope you'll use them to boost sales and make this holiday season the most profitable yet.



Holiday Ecommerce Sales (Nov. 1 - Dec. 31)

US holiday ecommerce sales have been on a steady climb over the past five years. -comScore (see figure above)

GIFT CARDS / CERTIFICATES

- 1 Show 'em off:** Prominently display gift cards and gift certificates on your homepage and make a category for them – over 2/3 of shoppers gave gift cards last year.
- 2 Up the ante:** When sending physical gift cards or certificates, include a decorated box that can be wrapped up and given as a gift. Don't be afraid to charge extra for this.
- 3 Set expectations:** When offering gift certificates or gift cards, be sure that you clearly state the expiration date, if applicable.
- 4 Utilize snail mail:** Have an option for shoppers to receive purchased gift cards or gift certificates by mail so your customer can present a physical gift to a loved one.

DESIGN

- 5 Create urgency:** Place a countdown on your landing pages and homepage that indicates how many days are left until important holidays.
- 6 Jazz up your logo:** Add some sort of holiday-themed design to your logo. Some ideas include hanging a bough of holly over one of the letters or changing it to include a shamrock for Saint Patrick's Day. Google does this quite frequently for various events and it adds a fun, personal touch to your branding.
- 7 Utilize your homepage:** Update your homepage graphic or slideshow to be focused, pointing customers to featured categories or your top-selling products.
- 8 Brand your buttons:** Spruce up the design of your buttons to reflect your brand by matching the color scheme and typography.
- 9 Be inspired:** Spend one hour looking at your favorite brands to draw inspiration for your own site design. Everyone can use some fresh ideas!
- 10 Don't forget your blog:** Try some quick changes to your blog design to match the aesthetic of your website. This will help you keep consistent branding across multiple communications channels.
- 11 Schedule your design takedown:** Set a date as a deadline to have your holiday design changes removed from your site, making sure to save your images and code for next year. You don't want to be that tacky neighbor who never takes down their lights.

SHIPPING

- 12 Cater to last-minute shoppers:** Provide an overnight shipping option to customers so they can receive their package in a hurry.
- 13 Display customer deadlines:** Tell customers on your homepage the absolute final day they can order and still receive their package in time for big holidays.
- 14 Look for special deals:** Check with your shipping provider to see if there are any new or discounted rates available. If so, you can lower costs for your business and customers.
- 15 Remember National Free Shipping Day:** December 17 is officially National Free Shipping Day (seriously). Consider offering free shipping on this day to stay competitive this close to the holidays.
- 16 Add that special touch:** Include a card inside the shipping box when you send customers their order. If you have time, make a hand-written note with a discount inside. This will give your customers a warm, fuzzy feeling and encourage them to come back for more!
- 17 Have your tools ready:** Stock up on all the shipping supplies you can imagine. Whether it's packing tape, boxes or bubble wrap, don't run out at the last minute and waste time running to the store to replenish.
- 18 Provide in-store pickup:** Offer an in-store pickup option if you have a retail location. This will save you and your customer cash on extraneous shipping charges.

19 Don't forget shoppers overseas: If you're selling internationally, be sure to include international shipping rates on your site.

20 Save money by learning from the past: If you offer shipping from multiple providers, run a report from previous orders to see which shipping provider is most popular with your customers. If there is a major difference in volume, consider dropping one of the providers as a cost-cutting measure. Customers are less sensitive to shipping providers, preferring to find the perfect product.

21 Downsize your packaging: Use the smallest box possible to send your items, making sure it's large enough to properly protect the item from breakage or damage. With the influx of orders, every penny saved on shipping makes a difference.

22 Do your homework: Check with each of your shipping providers to find the absolute time and date they must receive packages to ensure delivery to your customers for each of the major holidays, like Christmas and Chanukah. Don't assume that each provider shares the same time frame (they don't).

23 Get instant alerts on delays: Some shipping providers offer a way for you to subscribe to an email list for notification of any weather delays that affect the delivery of your items. Sign up for these notifications to make any required adjustments on your schedule before it's too late.

24 Offer free return shipping: Consider offering free shipping for returned items. Stealing this straight out of Zappos' playbook, but it's an idea that instills customer confidence before clicking the "Buy Now" button.

SITE CHANGES

25 Spruce up your descriptions: Jazz up the content of your product descriptions. For example, "The perfect gift for any woman, even those who are hard to please," is much more appealing than listing technical specs.

26 Combine related products: Create bundles or gift baskets of your products and create a specific category for them. You can also place these bundles in other categories you already have. Talk about cross-selling!

27 Create catered categories: Highlight your deals with a "Clearance" category by compiling your low-cost items into one location.

28 Make it personal: Allow your customers to include unique gift notes upon ordering. You can either have them place this in the order notes or create a custom field on your checkout page for that extra touch.

29 Go mobile: Ensure the mobile-optimized version of your online store has its logo and the categories are arranged properly. Mobile shopping made a huge impact on the 2011 holiday season, and its importance is only expected to grow.

30 No last minute surprises: Never, ever let shoppers be surprised by shipping charges once they reach the checkout page. Explicitly state the shipping cost before they push the final “Checkout” button. Surprise shipping charges are the #1 reason for abandoned shopping carts.

31 Say more than “thanks”: Provide a warm greeting and promote any upselling opportunities on your thank you page once customers place an order or subscribe to your newsletter.

32 Help dreams come true: Utilize your wish list function by creating a call out on your website or in an email campaign – this allows shoppers to find what they want and pass it along for someone else to buy!

33 Avoid roadblocks at checkout: On your checkout page, don’t force customers to register with your site. While it’s ideal to have all their contact information, the risk of order abandonment far outweighs the benefit of a new addition to your list.

34 Create site efficiencies: If possible, compress your images and video files to increase site speed.

35 Highlight affordable options: Make a dedicated clearance category to get rid of excess inventory and serve as a go-to category for bargain hunters.

36 Let others do the talking: Integrate customer reviews into your website and marketing materials – these are trusted more than advertisements or emails.

37 Include extra product visuals: Add video to your product descriptions to better highlight benefits, product usage and selling materials.

38 Reassure shopping safety: Reinforce the security of your site by posting your SSL seal prominently. Ecommerce includes a number of first-time/apprehensive buyers, so providing a sense of security can help reduce abandoned carts.

39 Make a list and check it twice: Perform a complete scan of your site to check for broken links and images. To check for broken links, try using a free tool like LinkChecker.

40 Beware of overdoing it: Walk a fine balance between optimizing your site navigation for new customers and drastically changing your site experience for returning customers. The last thing you want to do is prevent your most loyal customers from quickly finding what they want.

41 Get a second and third opinion: After making any design or navigation changes, pull in a few friends and even some strangers to do some user-testing. For example, ask them to find a certain product or to apply a coupon. This will help make sure you didn’t “over-do” it.

RETURNS

42 Simplify and promote: Revisit your return policy to ensure that it’s clear and understandable to your customers. Then, make sure it’s easy for shoppers to find it on your website to prevent any contested orders.

43 Establish deadlines: Directly state the amount of time customers have to return any items, whether it's 30 days or three months. This will protect you from chargebacks and disgruntled customers.

44 Stay on alert: Don't skimp on the time spent analyzing orders for fraud. With an influx of orders, it becomes easy to quickly process them without looking for the tell-tale signs of fraudulent activity.

45 Give yourself some extra time: Consider extending the returns period during the holiday season to help reduce headaches once the holidays are over.

PROMOTIONS/DISCOUNTS

46 Give something back: Try a campaign where you donate a certain percentage of sales to a local charity, like March for Dimes. This can help make a splash on the local news and go viral. Everyone likes to give back, so make it easy for your customers to do so.

47 Encourage bigger purchases: Consider offering a promotion where shoppers receive a gift card in addition to a certain order price. For example, if a customer spends \$50, they receive a \$5 gift card. If they spend \$100, a \$10 gift card, etc. This is a great way to get customers back to your store.

48 Offer gift wrapping: Offer free or reduced price gift wrapping to help shoppers in a pinch. And make sure you load up on paper and tape!

49 Blow it out on the big days: Offer exclusive discounts for Black Friday (day after Thanksgiving) and Cyber Monday (first Monday after Thanksgiving). These are both huge days for online sales.

50 Put shoppers on the hunt: Try a campaign where you hide a small image of something, like your logo, deep on one of your pages. Give a gift to a certain amount of users who find it first. This will encourage people to navigate all over your site and expose them to more and more of your products.

51 Entice customer loyalty: Highlight your customer loyalty program on your homepage, reminding customers that the more they buy, the more points/cash they receive for future purchases. This will entice them to spend more time on your site to rack up future savings.

52 Help others help you: Provide your affiliates with updated banners and advertisements that are branded and include callouts to your promotions.

53 Get rid of overstocked items: Clear out excess inventory by running a discount on leftover items, much like Groupon does.

54 Plan promotions strategically: Carefully study your margins on each product before launching any promotion – you can quickly eat away your profits.

55 Don't give away the farm: Avoid running storewide percent off sales to protect your margin. While the discount may not be too deep for some products, you could potentially lose money on others.

CUSTOMER SUPPORT

- 56 **Make a schedule and post it everywhere:** Create a promotions calendar and post it where you can easily reference it. Include the promotion, coupon code, time span, and applicable products for reference while on a customer call or chat.
- 57 **Look forward to the future:** Create specific tracking links for your campaigns to see which of your efforts were most successful.

EMAIL

- 58 **Deliver cheer to inboxes:** Send an email to your entire customer base with a special greeting that thanks them for their business. This will remind them to pay your site a visit when looking for gifts.
- 59 **Send friendly reminders:** Pull your abandoned carts list each week and send a reminder to these users to come back and complete their purchase.
- 60 **Increase your contact list:** Highlight your newsletter signup to increase the number of contacts you have. Remember, repeat customers are much cheaper to manage than acquiring new ones.
- 61 **Rock the follow-up:** After customers make their first purchase, send them a specialized newsletter that features all of your popular products and includes a “new customer” discount. It’s never too early to start building customer loyalty.

62 **Be available:** Step up your support by spending more hours on live chat and by the phone to answer any questions.

63 **Keep it consistent:** Extend your brand personality at every customer touch point. If you have a call center, make sure you answer the phone with a catered greeting or include a branded message on your live chat module. Even unsatisfied customers can’t decline a well-wishing.

PPC

64 **Add cheer to your keywords:** During the holidays, adjust your PPC campaigns to include holiday-related keywords, such as “gifts” or “presents.”

65 **Don’t sell yourself short:** Don’t just focus on a broad audience – there are several niche markets that deserve attention, too.

66 **Scale back on the content network:** Limit your PPC ads on the content network. Most shoppers are making specific product searches, not casually stumbling across ads as they read their favorite blog.

67 **Create urgency in your ad text:** Place shipping deadlines directly in your PPC ad text. For example, try something like, “Free shipping through (insert date)!”

68 Update your landing pages: Be consistent across all your marketing channels. If you mention a 10% off discount in your PPC ad text, make sure that your landing page also mentions that special.

69 Be in the know, now: Pay attention to Google Trends when looking for keywords. You can make quick changes to your PPC campaigns based on “hot” keywords, boosting your chances for visibility.

70 Be aggressive: Step up your competitive PPC bidding. With comparison shopping on the rise, well-written, strategic ad text can steal a sale from competitors.

71 Give specific suggestions: Cater your PPC ad text and keywords to target shoppers who are looking for gift ideas for loved ones. For example, use a keyword like “gifts for dad” with ad copy that includes suggestions like, “MyAwesomeStore.com has holiday gifts for men like watches, golf gloves and tie tacks for less.”

72 Entice comparison shoppers: Cater your PPC ad text and keywords to target shoppers who are comparison shopping for a specific product. For example, a product keyword like “Titleist golf clubs” should contain ad text that outlines a specific promotion. Remember, comparison shoppers are looking for the best deal.

73 Prevent wasting money on wasted clicks: In addition to looking at your PPC keywords, make sure to evaluate and utilize negative keywords.

74 Don't be a Scrooge: Potential customers are looking to spend a little bit more to find the perfect product, so you should be willing to spend a little more by raising your daily minimum on PPC.

INVENTORY

75 Learn from the past: Based on records from this year and last, make a sound estimate on the amount of inventory you'll need for future months. It's better to sell out of certain items than to waste money on excess inventory you'll never move.

76 Check what's already in stock: Take a look at your remaining inventory levels before making your next order to prevent over- or under-purchasing.

77 Put together a plan: Contact your vendors and product manufacturers to set expectations and put together a game plan. Figure out how to receive shipments faster, and if there are any items that won't be restocked or available.

78 Set your alarm: Revisit your stock status alarms and increase them to alert you at higher inventory levels than normal so you're aware of diminishing inventory before it's too late.

SEO

79 Feed search engines something new: Resubmit your site map sooner than later with new products and categories so search engines can index and rank them before the selling season takes off.

80 Utilize meta tags: Adjust your meta tags on categories and popular products to include pertinent keywords that will help the page rank of your category and product pages.

81 Turn to PR for help: Issue press releases with company news - charitable contributions, volunteering, etc. and include links to site with keywords in anchor text.

82 Refresh your copy with SEO in mind: Adjust your homepage headline and/or copy to show shoppers that you're the perfect place to purchase gifts, being sure to include similar keywords as before so you don't lose ground in your existing rankings.

SOCIAL MEDIA

83 Go for user generated content: Try a social media campaign where you ask customers to submit videos, photographs or letters on why they enjoy your products and business. Give respondents a discount on their product of choice, and then use their quotes and images on your website. Remember, testimonials are huge!

84 Add some spice: Redesign your social media channels, like Twitter and Facebook to be edgy and branded.

85 Extend discounts to the social world: Share your discounts and highlight featured products daily via social media – this creates a sense of urgency and helps extend your online reach.

86 Reach out and touch someone: Start networking with bloggers and e-magazines that are relevant to your product/industry. See if you can get onto any of their gift guides and if they'll link to your site using descriptive anchor text.

87 Ask your customers questions: Try a poll on your social media channels, asking, "If you could have one thing from (insert your store name), what would it be?" Then follow up by offering respondents a discount on the product they mentioned!

88 Turn to your blog for SEO help: Start writing blog posts that have specific long-tail keywords for various products in their headlines. Include information on why they're a hot item and post a link to that product page on your site.

89 Say hello to HARO: Subscribe to Help A Reporter Out (HARO) and monitor for something related to your industry. When a pertinent topic comes up, you can get free coverage and backlinks by creating a good piece of content.

90 Get customer insight now: Try using new technologies to get customer insights now. For example, you can set up a quick focus group with customers through Skype. (Good tip any time of year, especially with seasonal products.)

91 Give your fans control: Run a fun social media campaign asking fans and followers to submit themed redesigns for your company logo. Provide the winner with a free "shopping spree" at your store – talk about buzz!

CSEs

92 Get started with CSEs: Submit your products to Comparison Shopping Engines. If you're new to the game, get started by listing products on free engines like TheFind. Once you do some testing to see which perform the best, consider moving to paid CSEs or hiring a CSE management service. While not as many shoppers use CSEs as typical search engines, those who do use this type of product search are more likely to buy.

93 Pay attention to Amazon: If you're advertising on Amazon, load your account with holiday inventories, optimize your product titles and descriptions with terms like "Halloween costumes", "Christmas gifts" where appropriate, and raise your daily budget. Amazon feed allows you to include up to five keywords as additional attributes.

94 Utilize Nextag's customer reviews: If you have a shopping feed on Nextag, take full advantage of its customer survey function by creating and customizing your survey form. Encourage shoppers to rate/review your products, as more and more shopping engines consider customer/reseller reviews a factor in ranking.

95 Time is of the essence: Submit your products to CSEs early. It can take anywhere from 24 hours to four weeks to have your items listed, so don't delay.

ECOMMERCE SOFTWARE TIPS

96 Prep for phone orders: Become familiar with your phone order system if you're not already – some people prefer to call in and place their order after asking a few questions.

97 Don't show out of stock products: Enable your 'Hide When Out of Stock' option within your ecommerce software. This will prevent a bad customer experience and any last-minute inventory pushes.

98 Use site search to your advantage: Test your site search functionality to ensure user-friendliness when shoppers are looking for specific products.

99 Enable custom fields: Offer personalization add-ons to your products, such as engraving or embroidery, if appropriate.

100 Enhance product searches: Help customers find your products in search by enabling the "Did You Mean" configuration variable. That way, in case they misspell a word in their search on your site, they'll notice and have a chance to try again.

101 Give customers the chance to share: Enable social sharing features like the Google +1 button, the Facebook "Like" button and the Pinterest share button on your product pages. This allows your site visitors to plant the idea for the perfect gift directly on various social media pages.

ABOUT VOLUSION

Volusion is the leader in shopping cart software for online businesses. Since 1999, thousands of companies have used Volusion to succeed online, including market leaders such as 3M, Nalgene and National Geographic UK.

For more information about Volusion, please visit <http://www.volusion.com>.

For more articles and resources to help the growth and success of your online business, visit Volusion's Ecommerce Blog at <http://onlinebusiness.volusion.com>.

www.volusion.com

Send us a note: sales@volusion.com

Give us a call: 1.800.646.3517 x2

