HOW TO MAKE SURE YOUR

ECOMMERCE SITE IS READY FOR THE HOLIDAY SEASON

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INTRODUCTION

As the holidays approach, it's very important that your ecommerce site is ready to handle the season. Chances are, you'll see an influx of orders and website traffic and you need to make sure everything is in line from the functionality of the site to the user experience to even troubleshooting any potential problems that may come your way. We've put together a guide that consists of 10 vital tips and tricks to prepare your website and business for that busy holiday rush.

1. Have an Initial Site Checklist

2. Make Sure Pages Have a Quick Load Time

3. Optimize your Copy and Be Sure your Site is Holiday SEO Oriented

4. Your Site Should Be Responsive/Mobile Adaptive

5. Optimize Your Checkout

6. Optimize the Customer Experience and Buying Process

7. Write Holiday Blog Content

8. Run Intelligent Email Campaigns

9. Integrate Your Social Channels

10. Utilize Proper Data & Analytics

1. HAVE AN INITIAL SITE CHECKLIST

It's imperative to have a site checklist ready before the holidays come. There are four main points that take precedent over all.

(A) Have your site ready as soon as possible

You want to make sure everything is ready well ahead of time. Anticipate any changes, make sure you've got all the necessary elements in place, and run any sales or social campaigns before the holidays arrive. This way your target audience has you in mind before the holiday rush begins.

(B) Make sure teams and service partners can handle holiday traffic

There's going to be an influx of traffic on your site. It's absolutely critical that all teams and service partners are well equipped to handle this traffic. For any issues that may happen during this time, they've got to be prepared. Additionally, it's a good idea to implement some sort of training system for your staff just in case. Cyber Monday has gone from a simple buzz term to a bigger event each year. You definitely want to make sure your site is prepared for this event and the month and a half that follows.

C Make sure your site is secure

This is generally just a best practice for your website as it should always be secure. However, due to the increased traffic and risks that are posed by the holiday madness, it's always a good idea to double check beforehand.

D Have graphics ready before the holiday rush

It's a common best practice to have graphics ready days before implementation of any campaign or changes to your website, but you want to be absolutely sure that your graphics are ready long before the holiday rush. The time spent designing them will be valuable in other facets – from customer service, to maintenance and beyond. Having your campaigns and all appropriate holiday graphics ready allows you to change out campaigns, keep the content fresh and focus on your business and your customers.

2. MAKE SURE YOUR PAGES HAVE A QUICK LOAD TIME

Quick load time is everything on the web, especially if you're looking at an ecommerce site. Studies from Gomez have shown that 40% of average online shoppers leave your website after just three seconds. Therefore, it's a best practice to have your pages load in under 2 seconds. Your customers aren't going to wait around if your pages take too long to load, they'll find a competitor with a better load time. This basically gets into the user experience. Long load times are irritating and aren't conducive to holiday shopping. So again, make sure your pages have a load time of less than 2 seconds.

As a general rule, the following formats will be optimal for fast image load times:

GIF

Images with few colors

JPG

Detailed images with multiple colors

PNG

HQ Transparent images

2. OPTIMIZE YOUR COPY AND BE SURE YOUR SITE IS HOLIDAY SEO ORIENTED

It goes without saying that proper search engine optimization is everything for your site. Whether it's organic search or even PPC oriented campaigns, you want to make sure that your customers are finding your site via the correct keywords. Simply put, your site needs to be properly optimized for the holidays. As a result, your keywords may shift. For example, if you ran an ecommerce store that sells gardening supplies, keyword research may indicate during the holidays, people search for "gardening gift ideas for men" in relation to specific tools. The creation of a properly optimized holiday gift section page that is keyword rich and geared towards the season is absolutely in your best interest.

Therefore, it's always good to have a plan in place. Do your keyword research. Look at your competitors. Log into Google Analytics and dive deep into those numbers, facts and figures. See what's been done before. Try and have a solid understanding of what tactics and techniques will work best for your business. After this has been done, implement a holiday SEO strategy and stick to it. Gearing your content towards holiday keywords is a huge factor in making sure your site is ready for the holidays.

A FEW SEO GUIDELINES TO FOLLOW:

A **Supply accurate product descriptions**

Make sure your descriptions are up to date and accurate. They should be properly optimized. Minimal product descriptions are not only irritating for the customer, but they aren't going to help your organic search terms. Remember, Google ranks pages and not the site as a whole, so your end goal should always be conversion.

B **Eradicate duplicate content**

Make sure you're doing your best to avoid duplicate content. You don't want it to get flagged so be sure to change it up. Every page should have an end goal – the consumer needs to find you and you need to convert page views into sales. From a general search perspective, avoid sales at all costs.

C **Regularly add content to your site**

A FEW SEO GUIDELINES TO FOLLOW (CONTINUED):

Why Regularly Add Content?

You want to be sure your site is fresh, not stagnant. Any sort of engaging content you can bring to your site is optimal. Blogs, product videos, how-to tutorials, holiday themed content – if it's relevant to the season and even remotely relevant to the product, find a way to work it in. For example, if you're a furniture store and someone's looking for a how-to video about cleaning a microfiber couch, adding this content to your site may lead them there. This not only lends to increased brand awareness, but could lead to future purchases of other items. As is the key with inbound marketing, if customers have a reason to be on your site, it can lead to conversions in other areas. Remember, it's not just about having an awesome product; it's 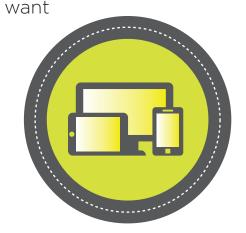about providing an experience that they can utilize and benefit from. Nobody likes the hard sell. Let's repeat that for all you marketers and sales types out there alike: Nobody likes the hard sell.

4. YOUR SITE SHOULD BE RESPONSIVE/MOBILE ADAPTIVE.

PEW Internet Research released figures showing that 91% of American adults have a cell phone, 56% of American adults have a smart phone and 34% of American adults own a tablet computer. As a result, if your website isn't responsive or mobile adaptive, it needs to be. This isn't a "oh, in the future you should make this happen" type of suggestion. If your site isn't' responsive, it needs to happen ASAP. A responsive website adapts to different screen resolutions to provide an intuitive user experience. There are many ways that people access the web today – from phones, tablets, PC's – all with different screen resolutions. Therefore, you want to make sure your site is easily viewable and formatted for all of these devices. A mobile adaptive site differs from a responsive site in the fact that it will use predefined layout sizes based on your device screen.

When developing your site to be responsive, you also want to think about connection speed. This is an important factor to consider, and falls in line with what we've discussed in relation to the user and functionality of your site. In addition, don't ignore mobile SEO. It is absolutely vital to have your site properly optimized for mobile users.

5. OPTIMIZE YOUR CHECKOUT

Your checkout process should be simple and optimized. Customers greatly benefit from a secure site that features one page checkout and allows multiple forms of payment. Remember that with checkout, it's a best practice to be as simple and painless as possible for the customer. Providing them with a secure site and as little steps as possible is the way to go. Nobody wants to jump through hoops just to purchase a DVD. They want to get in and get out. Part of the appeal of an ecommerce website is the convenience factor. Take that away from your customer and it's in direct conflict with why you've set up the website in the first place.

6. OPTIMIZE THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE & BUYING PROCESS

There are numerous things you can do to your site from a usability standpoint. A custom design to your site will always add to the overall experience. It's as simple as that. Make sure your most important information is above the fold as well. According to The Nielsen Norman Group, the typical internet user spends 80% of his/her time on info that is above the fold. Breadcrumbs are also an excellent idea – not only does it help with your site's search and functionality, but it aids the customer experience. Think of breadcrumbs like asking for directions. It's a way to navigate the site without getting totally lost. It's especially useful if you have to double back.

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE & BUYING PROCESS (CONTINUED):

How Can You Ehance This Process?

You also want to enhance the buying experience for the customer. The following things can be done to add some zest to the purchase process:

➡ Multiple quality images

➡ Thorough and interesting product descriptions

➡ Interactive experiences where applicable
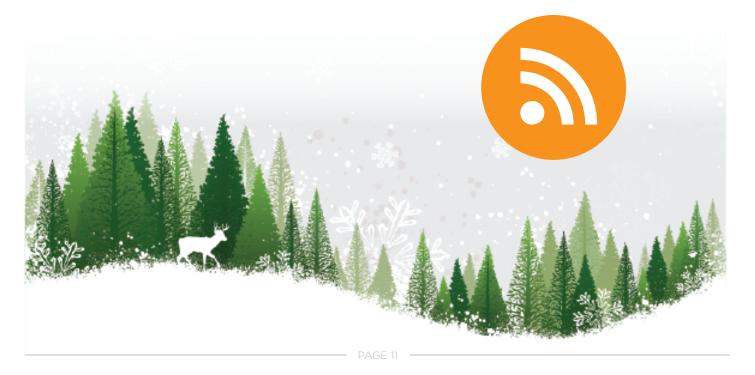   - IE virtual fitting rooms or design your own features functionality (FIGURE 1)

FIGURE 1:

Vans, for example, gives shoppers the ability to customize their own shoes. They are able to pick out every single detail, right down to the foxing stripe and binding on the shoe.

7. WRITE HOLIDAY BLOG CONTENT

This goes in line with optimizing your site. You should already have a blog to help spread the word about products, promotions or just general industry related news and events. When writing out your content calendar, November through January should focus on the holiday season. Don't just limit your blog writing to products and promotions for the holiday, either. Find creative ways to tie your brand into the holidays. The idea is to give potential clients keyword-rich content that is not only useful but can also generate additional sales and brand awareness. Remember the main rule: avoid the hard sell. Tie in useful topics and subjects while incorporating your merchandise. This doesn't mean you should just avoid talking about products, but if every blog is "you should buy product X because we think it's a good idea," then you're going to lose an audience fast. Be creative.

8. RUN INTELLIGENT EMAIL CAMPAIGNS

Email marketing is still a very useful art. Regarding conversion, it's still more effective than social media for generating sales. You certainly don't want to use your email list in any sort of spammy capacity, but well written emails can generate sales. In addition, you can create campaigns that utilize landing pages geared towards existing customers and obtaining new ones. A marketing automation tool such as Marketo can help manage your email databases and allow you to track leads. If your business also has a separate sales department, this is a perfect way to integrate marketing/sales efforts as you score and nurture leads.

Remarketing is also another useful tactic in email campaigns. This has been shown to reduce the effects of shopping cart abandonment. Wish lists are nice and so is loading up the cart, but when the items are all purchased, you've hit the sweet spot.

9. INTEGRATE YOUR SOCIAL CHANNELS

Social media is an important tool for branding. However, it doesn't have to just stop at brand awareness. If each product has a share button for various networks, this encourages customers to share items they want with multiple social channels, resulting in more exposure for your business. You can also use your social channels to run holiday oriented contests (this has been a huge success for Sephora and other businesses). Another idea is to use your social channels to help promote user-generated content about your goods or services. Word of mouth marketing is extremely powerful, so be sure to use social media to help generate buzz about your brand.

10. INTEGRATE YOUR SOCIAL CHANNELS

If there's one surefire rule regarding ecommerce web maintenance, it's that interpreting numbers and using them to your advantage is a vital process. By combing through data and site analytics, you can reduce cart abandonment, drive retention, and create loyal customers. You also want to collect as much data as possible for onsite product discovery and personalized and targeted campaigns. Remember, data is your friend. Sifting through analytics software may be tedious at times, but understanding the numbers will help you properly target your campaigns and sales objectives. Often times, you learn things about your target demographic that you may not have known otherwise.

Tying It All Together

Following these 10 guidelines for the holiday season can help boost the success of your ecommerce website. Don't rush your holiday campaigns at the last minute – have your site ready ahead of time and make sure it's relevant for the season. This gives you a better chance to generate additional sales and drive business for those busy months at the end of the year.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

➡ www.mattcutts.com/blog/site-speed

➡ www.nngroup.com/articles/scrolling-and-attention

➡ www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=40694

➡ pewinternet.org/Commentary/2012/February/Pew-Internet-Mobile.aspx

➡ www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2013/Tablet-Ownership-2013.aspx

➡ support.google.com/webmasters/answer/35769?hl=en

➡ www.marketo.com/ebooks/10-tips-for-successful-email-marketing-campaigns

➡ blog.hubspot.com/ecommerce/does-your-ecommerce-site-pass-the-blink-test