



PREPARING FOR THE HOLIDAYS

By Amy Brooks

Once the weather starts turning colder and leaves are falling, minds are already on the holiday shopping season.

Whether it's making a wish list, researching the family's big gift or keeping an eye out for that perfect item, shoppers start thinking about holiday gifts in early fall, making it necessary for retailers to enact holiday plans even earlier in order to stay ahead of the curve.

With the large teams of people and even larger budgets of major chains, both brick-and-mortar and online, it's necessary for independent retailers to play it smart when it comes to Black Friday and Cyber Monday, the biggest shopping days of the year, using advertising budgets as efficiently as possible, highlighting the benefits of buying with a local business and giving the customer a positive overall experience that will generate referrals.

Here are some tips to help you cut through the noise of the busiest shopping days of the year and start the holiday season strong.

THINK AHEAD

Consumers don't wait until November or December to shop for holiday gifts. In its *2017 Holiday Planning Playbook*, the National Retail Federation reported that 54 percent of shoppers start researching their holiday purchases in October or earlier.

"If you haven't yet started planning for these holidays, you're already behind," says Denise Lee Yohn, author of *"What Great Brands Do."*

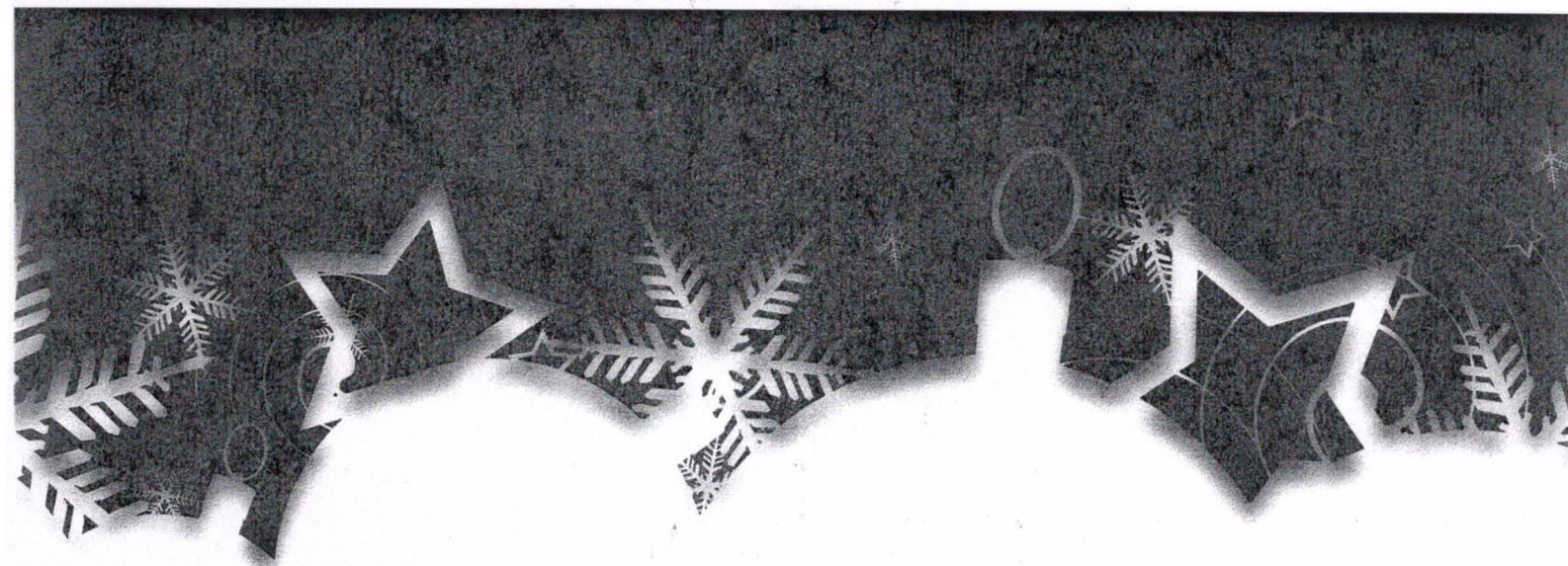
While you want to get your store and products into the minds of potential customers who are making their holiday lists, you don't want to start running holiday promotions until the season begins as it could create "deal fatigue."

"Consider creating news, and generating traffic in new and different ways, including promoting new products and brands, offering exclusive access or services, and celebrating other holidays," Lee Yohn advises.

One approach is to run a general ad campaign in early fall. Pat Sullivan, general manager of Total Recreation in Minnesota, starts his company's campaign in September by running television ads.

"The reason why I start the whole ad process [in early fall] is to promote holiday shopping, get your name out there, get





very visible,” Sullivan says. “I’ve already had a handful of people say ‘Well, we’re looking for Christmas.’ They’re already in the gift-giving process.”

While sparking consumers’ interest before the holiday season can get your products on holiday wish lists, the NRF reports that almost two-thirds of holiday shoppers said they would like to use retailer wish lists. These lists could be curated by the retailer or become a special feature where shoppers can save and share their own lists of products they want.

DON'T COUNT OUT SMALL BUSINESS SATURDAY

While retailers like Walmart and Target have the resources to run huge Black Friday and Cyber Monday campaigns, it can be difficult for smaller businesses to keep up. Instead of trying to compete on these days, a worthwhile strategy could be to focus on Small Business Saturday.

“I can’t compete with Walmart,” says Lynne Cornwall, owner of Encore Billiards & Game Room, Milford, Connecticut. “I don’t have the budget to compete with them.”

Instead, Cornwall focuses on the day after Black Friday when people are more likely to look at independent retailers in their community. She promotes her company’s participation through her emails and advertising by adding “please promote local businesses and help the local economy.”

Shoppers have shown that they are eager to support local retailers. According to a 2016 Small Business Saturday Consumer Insights Survey, people spent \$15.4 billion at independent restaurants and retailers on that day.

To help small businesses promote themselves and get customers through the door, the creator of Small Business Satur-

day, American Express, offers free, customizable marketing materials on its website.

BE RESEARCH READY

Shopping for holiday gifts is no longer a simple task of going to the store, picking out a gift and purchasing it. Instead, many customers spend time doing research online before they walk into a brick-and-mortar store. These highly informed shoppers will look into competitors’ websites as well before choosing which store to visit.

“When [customers] walk in the door, they already know price points and brands,” said Ciarra McIntire, president of Universal Billiards Inc., Dallas, Texas. “Sometimes they walk in and can specifically reference individual elements of the items that they want. They are highly educated and very informed.”


Since a retailer’s website is frequently the customer’s first introduction to a company and its products, McIntire stresses the importance of having high-quality photos of products.

“People need to be able to zoom into photos and see the product really clearly,” she says.

In today’s highly social and interactive society, consumers’ research also includes reading reviews on retailers and individual products.

The NRF reported that nearly all shoppers [96 percent] read reviews specific to retailers’ sites and nine in 10 said they found these reviews at least somewhat trustworthy, meaning that product reviews are a worthwhile addition to any website.

“[Shoppers] really want to go online, browse and feel like they can learn everything they need to know about the product,” the NRF’s Holiday Planning Playbook explains. “Retail-



ers must ensure their product review pages are up to date and prominently displayed in conjunction with products.”

Some tech-savvy retailers have even incorporated QR codes with their products and displays, allowing customers to easily access more information about the product on their smartphones.

ADVERTISING ISN'T EVERYTHING

According to LeeYohn, a common mistake many retailers make when planning for the holiday season kickoff is emphasizing advertising and promotions to the point that they overlook other aspects of the customer experience. The customer experience is too important to overlook as LeeYohn says it is “the most impactful and sustainable way to differentiate your brand.”

Interacting with customers every day, Sullivan believes that people wanting to buy a recreational item like a pool table are looking for a similarly enjoyable purchasing experience. He relaxes them by talking about what brings them into the store. This sometimes leads into conversations about a remodeled house or the college that a son or daughter has recently moved to.

“You just want people to feel good that they did business with you,” Sullivan says.

This feeling breeds repeat customers and referrals. In fact, the NRF notes that a consumer’s feelings after their purchase are especially impactful during the holiday season when people spend more time with their family and friends and are more likely to share stories of positive – or negative – experiences.

Customers who are left feeling happy after their purchases are also more likely to leave a review than those who had negative experiences. The Holiday Planning Playbook reports that 63 percent of customers write product reviews, and 73 percent of these shoppers said that they were more likely to do this when they were satisfied.

KEEP THE SEASON'S MOST POPULAR ITEMS IN STOCK

Taking industry trends into account can have a huge impact on the success of holiday sales. These trends will determine which products will be best to promote in advertisements and which should be featured predominantly in in-store or online displays as well as what the store should have in stock.

“The number-one thing for people like us is making sure you have enough inventory for the demand,” McIntire says. “If you don’t, you’re going to lose sales.”

In order to predict products that will be in high demand for the coming holiday season, McIntire looks at the previous year's fourth quarter sales as well as current trends.

"This year we have seen an increase in certain styles. Last year it was more about very rustic furniture, this year it's more of a rustic-modern look," McIntire says. "So we're trying to stock a lot of product that meets design trends for what we see today."

Product trends are just as important as design trends. Sullivan noticed that this year people were becoming more interested in shuffleboard sales. This led him to highlight the shuffleboards he has for sale in his television ads.

The NRF suggests looking to social media to stay up-to-date on the latest trends. It recommends that "retailers should strive not only to have these products in-store but also prominently displayed on their websites, not lost in thousands of SKUs."

Since customers' yearly buying preferences can sometimes be hard to predict, McIntire cautions that over-planning can be a pitfall as much as under-planning.

"When you're over-planning, I think you tend to lack flexibility to move with the margin as the season starts," she says. "So I think that you have to be considerate about the fourth quarter, and plan, but don't get too tied up into all of your plans, just in case something is amiss."

DON'T FORGET EMPLOYEES

With advertising strategies to enact, inventory to order and customers to please, it can be easy to overlook one of the key components of a business's success — its employees.

The holidays bring one of the busiest seasons for nearly every retailer. Staff are kept busy helping shoppers pick out the perfect present and often additional employees are needed to meet the influx of customers.

"I think it's important to plan and keep spirits high, so we have lots of fun stuff going on in the fourth quarter to help keep our team upbeat," McIntire says.



McIntire says she sometimes brings in breakfast in order to help everyone start the day energized and motivated.

"If I have to remind myself when to eat during the month of December, I know that everybody who works with me feels the same way," she says.

